



The Holy See

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. In the joy of the Risen Christ I welcome you, members of the Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, on your ad Limina visit, and I look forward later on in the year to meeting other groups of Bishops from your beloved country. You have come to the City which preserves the " trophaea " of the Apostles Peter and Paul, the See of Rome which presides in love over all the Churches, to manifest the communion which unites us in the College of the Successors of the Apostles. This communion with the Successor of Peter is the guarantee of your membership of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, and it calls forth and strengthens your solicitude for the welfare of the universal Church in the unity of faith and discipline and in love for all her members, especially the poor and those who suffer want or persecution for the sake of justice.

The whole Church shines with the light of the Easter Mystery which we have just celebrated. In the Risen Lord we recognize the " chief Shepherd " who has sent us to tend the flock of God that is our charge. The certainty of Christ's final victory over sin and death fills us with joy and hope in the exercise of our episcopal ministry. Today we entrust to him your priests, the men and women religious who cooperate in your apostolate, the people you serve in the Lord's name in each of your particular Churches. I ask you to take back to all of them the assurance of my deepest affection in Christ and my prayers for their spiritual and temporal progress.

2. My Brothers: you have been called to shepherd the Church of God in the Philippines at a time when very specific demands are being made on faith and fidelity. In your own Pastoral Letters of recent years you have indicated and described some of the burning issues facing society and the Church in your country. On many occasions you have spoken out against the high level of violence which takes the lives of so many innocent victims. You have expressed your deep concern for the massive poverty and inequality affecting the lives of the majority of your people. You have called attention to the moral evils that have become "an ordinary fixture of (your) nation's public life".

At the same time you have not failed to express confidence in the capacity of the Filipino people to meet these challenges by drawing above all on the spiritual resources of their Christian heritage. You have called for a new social solidarity. And you understand this solidarity in the way I have described it in the Encyclical " Sollicitudo Rei Socialis ": " Solidarity helps us to see the 'other' - whether a person, people or nation - not just as some kind of instrument, with a work capacity and physical strength to be exploited at low cost and then discarded when no longer useful, but as our 'neighbor', a 'helper', to be made a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which

all are equally invited by God. Hence the importance of reawakening the religious awareness of individuals and peoples ". As one of you has stated: " The transformation of Philippine society is beyond the capacity of political and economic prescriptions. But it can be achieved through the involvement of men (and women) animated by a vision and vigor born of the Spirit ".

3. I ardently encourage you, the Pastors of Christ's flock, to insist on this approach. What is your specific contribution to the needs of your people? What is the " spiritual gift " that has been given to you for the good of your brothers and sisters? It is none other than the " Gospel " of our Lord Jesus Christ, that is, " the power of God for salvation ". Thus, in the midst of God's holy people, the Bishop in an eminent way is called to center his own life on Christ, the source of that salvation: to seek Christ's friendship in prayer, to celebrate the sacred mysteries with spiritual fruitfulness for himself and his people, to act in such a way that his personal example leads his brothers and sisters to ever deeper Christian faith, hope and love.

The essential greatness of your ministry therefore lies in the fact that you present not a human doctrine, however clever, but the living reality of the Incarnate Word, so that believing all may have life in his name. It is this " life ", then, which should shine forth in the personal and collective behavior of the Church's members. Because of their particular sensitivity to spiritual values, Filipinos expect their Bishops, priests and religious to reflect that inner peace and nobility that comes from closeness to God. From your own experience you know that the priestly and episcopal ministry is nourished by personal conversion (metànoia) and untiring striving for holiness of life.

4. In order to emphasize the great need to transmit the essentials of the faith to the present generation of Filipinos, you have declared 1990 " National Catechetical Year ", with the aim of providing a more effective, comprehensive and continuous catechesis in your Catholic communities. In this respect it is appropriate to recall the words of the extraordinary session of the Synod of Bishops of 1985: " Everywhere on earth today the transmission to the young of the faith and the moral values deriving from the Gospel is in danger ". You have felt inspired to call your particular Churches to this specific effort in the field of catechesis because the children and youth who make up such a high percentage of the Filipino population often lack the opportunity to receive education, including religious instruction. You are also aware of the need to help your people apply their religious faith to the realities of life in a more practical way. A year devoted to the theme of catechesis can well serve to draw attention to this essential aspect of the Church's life, while in the long term too there must be a deep commitment on the part of the Church in the Philippines to raising the level of religious knowledge and culture. Only in this way can the message of the Gospel truly penetrate and uplift Filipino society.

This new and deeper evangelization calls for dedicated and expert leadership. A Bishop has a personal responsibility to teach the faith of the Church. He himself therefore needs time to read, study and prayerfully assimilate the contents of the Church's tradition and Magisterium. Many time-consuming demands are made on you in the fulfilment of your prophetic, priestly and pastoral roles, and I am fully aware of the generous way in which you respond. In this respect, the evaluation which the Apostles made of their activities - " It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables " - serves as a guideline to their successors in every

age, reminding them that certain fundamental duties and far-reaching priorities must be pursued with wise determination. Administrative and social engagements, however unavoidable, must be harmonized with more basic tasks. Bishops also need to practise a subsidiarity which leaves ample room for the cooperation of priests and qualified lay persons in activities not strictly related to their pastoral office.

5. Of special importance for the future of the Church in your Dioceses and in your country, and indeed for the growth of the Church in all of Asia, is the question of the appropriate formation of your priests. In preparation of the forthcoming session of the Synod of Bishops, you held a meeting in January to discuss this matter. Some aspects of this ecclesial reality deserve further reflection. The first is the need to enunciate a proper and complete doctrine of the Catholic priesthood. Action follows thought, and it is therefore essential to avoid building training programs on inaccurate or partial views of the Sacrament of Orders and the ministry of priests. Secondly, I wish to encourage you to continue the intelligent and generous policy followed by many Filipino Bishops, namely, identifying and training priests who can willingly and effectively serve in seminaries, sharing resources of personnel and economic means with dioceses or regions unable by themselves to provide quality formation.

The spiritual and pastoral care of your priests and seminarians lies at the very heart of your episcopal ministry. As Pastors, you know that no effort of prayer, study and work can be spared in this part of the Lord's vineyard. In particular, newly ordained priests in the first years of their ministry need special attention and guidance. Sometimes they find themselves alone and without sufficient spiritual strength and experience to face inevitable difficulties. You well know that your discreet and fatherly presence at such times can be very valuable. Moreover, priests who have left their Dioceses for reasons that are not altogether sufficient should be invited to solve their difficulties and return to their duties. God is blessing your particular Churches with an increase of vocations to the priesthood and religious life. I encourage you not to let other apparently more urgent needs distract you from directing the best of your resources to the spiritual and academic formation of these young men.

6. The already heavy burden of your ministry is further increased by the effects of proselytizing efforts by numerous sects and fundamentalist religious groups. When these groups confuse the faithful regarding fundamental truths of the faith and present a false interpretation of Scripture, or undermine popular elements of Catholic culture, the whole Catholic community should respond with renewed evangelizing efforts. The members of the Church should be made more aware of their Catholic identity and become more personally involved in their local communities. This in no way detracts from the genuine ecumenism and cooperation which should characterize your relations with other Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities taking part in the modern ecumenical movement which the Council saw as inspired by the Holy Spirit.

7. Dear Brothers, I have mentioned only some of the many challenges which you face day by day in your episcopal ministry. In the Lord's name I thank you for the generous way in which you strive to fulfil your responsibilities. You are privileged to serve the Church in the major Catholic country in Asia. The path of the Church in your vast continent must be the path taken by Christ himself, who "though he was by nature God... emptied himself, taking the form of a servant ". Therefore, you do

not work for earthly glory, but in order to proclaim humility and self-sacrifice, even by your own example.

In all of this, you and your faithful people have a powerful incentive and model in the Blessed Virgin Mary to whom you are so deeply devoted. May she intercede for you and for the priests, religious and laity of your Dioceses, so that the word of God may take root ever more deeply in the minds and hearts of all, and so that effective love and solidarity may be shown to those in need, especially the children, the aged and the sick. I bless you from my heart.

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