



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF
MYANMAR ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT**

*Castel Gandolfo
Tuesday, 27 August 1991*

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. It is with particular joy that I welcome you, the *Bishops of Myanmar*, on the occasion of your *ad Limina* visit, which brings you here to pray at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, to meet the Bishop of Rome, and to bear witness to the apostolic faith of the Church universal.

Your presence, which I have keenly anticipated, is an occasion of rejoicing, for you have come from a Catholic community which is truly a *pusillus grex*, and is for just that reason very close to my heart. I particularly give thanks to God that after almost thirty years the Bishops of your land are able to make this pilgrimage together. We praise our Lord for the many signs of vitality in the Church in Myanmar, especially for the establishment of the two new Dioceses of Loikaw and Lashio. I thank Archbishop U Than Aung, President of your Conference, for the remarks offered in the name of each of you. They were not only informative but expressed profound sentiments of loyalty and devotion which are very much appreciated.

It is my fervent hope that this visit will strengthen not only your communion with the Successor of Peter but also that "*fellowship of fraternal charity*" (cf. *Christus Dominus*, 36) which must characterize the members of the same Episcopal Conference. Only if you are united among yourselves in bonds of esteem and friendship will there emerge "a holy union of energies in the service of the common good of the Churches" (*Ibid.*, 37). There are many areas in which the Bishops of a given region or country must "jointly exercise their pastoral office" (*Ibid.*, 38) if they are to respond effectively to the challenges facing Christian faith and life. Actively contributing to the efficacy of the Episcopal Conference is a magnificent way of expressing the "daily anxiety for all the Churches" (2 Cor. 11:28) which is a solemn duty of every Bishop. I therefore encourage you

always to be like the first Christian community, as described in the *Acts of the Apostles*: "of one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32). I also hope that the recently established Apostolic Delegation, by consistently ensuring the presence of a Pontifical Representative, will help to strengthen further the ties between the Dioceses in Myanmar and foster more regular contacts with the Apostolic See and with the universal Church.

2. After a long period of dependence on external missionary support, the Church in your country has had *to rely more and more upon its own personnel and resources*. Building on what courageous missionaries have done for the faith in your land and with the generous collaboration of your native priests, Religious and catechists, you are endeavouring to carry out your ecclesial mission in a situation which is not always easy. However, precisely because of the circumstances in which your Churches live, we can trace out in them the recapitulation of the work of the Apostles in this City. Saint Peter as well as Saint Paul came to Rome with scant resources, and it would have seemed likely that their voices should have been drowned out by the overwhelming tide of a culture which had not yet received the Good News of salvation. Nevertheless, the Gospel to which they testified, even to the shedding of their blood, triumphed. I invite you, dear Brothers, to take courage from visiting their tombs, the very sites at which they in their weakness conquered their conquerors. Let your confidence for the future not be based on your own efforts alone. Thus, with the Apostle Paul you will be able to say, "I will all the more gladly boast of my weakness, that the power of Christ may rest upon me . . . ; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

3. Returning to one of the many themes of our conversations regarding the particular Churches over which you preside in love, I wish to encourage your efforts to lead the Catholic community in a *decade of evangelization* which will prepare for the next Christian millennium. Evangelization is an extraordinarily rich concept. As the recent Encyclical "*Redemptoris Missio*" indicates, "Mission is a single but complex reality, and it develops in a variety of ways" (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 41). While the Church's fundamental function always and everywhere is "to point the awareness and experience of the whole of humanity towards the mystery of Christ" (John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 10), the manner in which this is to be done involves a discernment regarding ways and means, in obedience to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. It is the special responsibility of the Bishops to promote the appropriate response of their communities to the command of Christ: "Go . . . make disciples . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt. 28:19-20).

In spite of the complexity of the problems of evangelization in your continent, the *Fifth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* held in Bandung in July of last year took a hopeful view of the Church's path. The Bishops noted that, "seen with the eyes of faith, these difficulties, together with the signs of hope that accompany them, are as so many challenges to mission" (*Final Statement*, III, 3. 0). I wish to encourage you to have this same positive attitude and to seek to discern the appropriate paths for evangelizing those entrusted to your care.

4. It is impossible to reflect on the life and mission of the Christian community in your country without realizing the importance of *bearing witness by word and deed to authentic evangelical values*. The vast majority of your fellow citizens follow that form of Buddhism which is called the "small vehicle", and their religious traditions permeate the whole life of society. They are sensitive to a spiritual attitude which emphasizes renunciation, self-giving and peaceful relations with all, values which find their full realization in the life of our Saviour. Did not our Lord Jesus Christ empty himself, taking the form of a servant (cf. Phil. 2:6)? Was he not sent by the Father "to bring the good news to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart" (Lk. 4:18), "to seek and save what was lost" (*Ibid.*, 19:10)? Was not this sublime message of humble respect for God's will and self-giving love for the least of our brothers and sisters summed up in the Beatitudes, the New Law given in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Mt. 5:3-10)?

In showing the face of the Redeemer to those in your homeland who do not yet know him, you hasten the day when they will find him for whom their hearts have longed. In offering Christ to them you disclose "the Way, and the Truth, and the Life" (Jn. 14:6) whereby every opposition or limitation is overcome. This does not happen through the negation or annihilation of differences, but through the union in God's love given as a free gift of his Spirit. In preaching Christ you hasten the day *for which Christ himself longs*. He calls all peoples to his Bride, the Church, so that he, the Bridegroom, may, with the widest of loving embraces, enter a union wherein the many become one without loss of their identity (cf. Eph. 5:23-32 and *Lumen Gentium*, 6 and 13, cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter on Certain Aspects of the Christian Meditation*, 12-15).

5. This great challenge of cooperating in the Spirit's work of drawing all to Christ must be met in the first place by you, the Bishops, and by the priests and men and women Religious of your dioceses, each according to his or her specific vocation in the Church. That is why I wish to encourage you to give your utmost attention to the *pastoral care of vocations and to the formation of your priests and Religious*. The National Major Seminary must have a certain pride of place among the concerns of your Conference. In spite of the limitations which are well known to you, efforts must be continually made to raise the level of the formation being given. It is also my hope that there will be more frequent opportunities for candidates for the priesthood to be prepared at Ecclesiastical Universities outside of Myanmar.

6. We also recognize that *the laity play an indispensable role in shaping society according to the Gospel, especially in their families and in their work. For this they need the constant support of their pastors*. They need formation in the faith, so as to have the interior strength to persevere in Christian living and to make known the reasons of the hope that is in them, always - as the author of the First Letter of Peter writes - with gentleness and reverence (cf. 1 Pt. 3:15). I am heartened by the fact that you are doing much to ensure the catechetical formation of lay leaders in your communities, and that you give special attention to competent young people, such as the "Home Missioners" or the "Little Evangelizers", who bring the word of God to remote areas or to their contemporaries who would otherwise not be reached by the Church. Your Catholic associations

are numerous and fervent. Upon all of these generous Catholics I implore an increase of God's love and protection.

Mention of the laity's role in evangelizing society calls to mind the affirmation of the recent Encyclical "Centesimus Annus" that "the Church's *social teaching* is itself a valid *instrument of evangelization*" (John Paul II, Centesimus Annus, 54), precisely because it concerns itself with all things human in the light of the higher mystery of God's plan of salvation for the world. "In this light, and only in this light, does [the Church] concern itself with everything else: the rights of the individual, and in particular of the "working class", the family and education, the duties of the State, the ordering of national and international society, economic life, culture, war and peace, and respect for life from the moment of conception until death" (John Paul II, Centesimus Annus, 54).

The Church teaches the demands of justice and seeks the implementation of justice at every level of society, not for any purely temporal motive but for the genuine welfare of individuals in view of their *transcendent destiny*. The Church's efforts in the field of integral human development is above all a work of love and the creation of a "civilization of love": the love, that is, with which Jesus Christ gave himself up for us (cf. Eph. 5:2), the love which he showed in his earthly life when he experienced a deep compassion for people (cf. Mt. 9:36). As the Final Statement of the Bandung Assembly stated, the Church was sent "to serve the Asian peoples in their quest for God and for a better human life; to serve Asia . . . in the manner of Christ himself who did not come to be served but to serve and to lay down his life as a ransom for all (cf. Mk. 10:45) - and to discern, in dialogue with Asian peoples and Asian realities, what deeds the Lord wills to be done so that all humankind may be gathered together in harmony as his family" (*Final Statement*, III, 6, 3). I know that this is your way of life, that you are close to the poor and the suffering. Although you cannot embark on major projects of social assistance, your door is always open to the widow and the orphan, to the elderly and the handicapped so that the light of Christ's love will shine in their lives too.

7. Dear Brother Bishops, as you return to your people, bring with you the renewed conviction that Christ is sending you before him as his heralds and witnesses. May you yourselves "be renewed in the spirit of your minds" (cf. Eph. 4:23)! Never lose heart, no matter what difficulties may surround your ministry. Be a source of inspiration and encouragement for your priests. Sustain the men and women Religious who cooperate with you in the care of God's people. Be examples of Christian living to all the faithful. And be assured that each day I remember you in prayer before the Lord: that you may be "filled with the Spirit . . . always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father" (Eph. 5:18, 20).

May the holy Mother of God look upon you and intercede for the peace and reconciliation which your nation needs. As a token of my spiritual closeness I impart my Apostolic Blessing to all the Catholic faithful of Myanmar.

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