



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 4 December 1993

*Your Eminence,
Dear Brother Bishops,*

With affection I greet you, "beloved in God the Father... May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance" (*Gd. 2: 3*).

1. It is a great joy to welcome you – the *Bishops of California, Nevada and Hawaii* – and to celebrate the faith and charity which unites us in the College of Bishops (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 23). Within the Body of Christ which is the Church there is a constant exchange of spiritual gifts from one particular Church to another, and between the particular Churches and the Church universal. In this context, your "*ad limina*" visit is an expression of the mystery of grace by which "the Holy Spirit has placed us to shepherd the Church of God... as teachers of doctrine, priests of sacred worship, and ministers of governance" (*Lumen Gentium*, 20). With God's grace your visit will mutually encourage and enrich us as we seek to *continue the work of Christ, the Eternal Pastor*, the Shepherd of our souls (Cf. 1Pt. 2: 25).

Yours is the last in this series of "*ad limina*" visits by the Bishops of the United States. These visits to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul have enabled us to reflect on *the moment that the Church is living in your country*, and on the responsibilities of the Bishops before the Lord in carrying out the evangelical command to preach the Gospel to all peoples, to sanctify the faithful in the truth and to nourish them with the divine life of grace. Though your task is never easy, I remember the words of Archbishop Keeler, the President of your Conference, in Denver last August, when he pointed out that the Church in the United States is very much alive and growing, and mentioned that last year alone one million new members were added to its number. The vast

majority of priests, Religious and laity sustain you through their fervent faith and steadfast witness of Christian life and love.

2. Indeed, the [World Youth Day in Denver](#) offered us all a confirmation of the vitality of the Catholic community in the United States. The young especially are *a lively and promising sign of God's life-giving presence in the heart of the world*.

The Holy Spirit is awakening in the Church's members a longing for transcendence, stirring up in their hearts a desire for an intimate, personal relationship with the Triune God. People are increasingly asking: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mk. 10: 17). Individually and as a group, the Bishops of the United States are being challenged to respond to that spiritual thirst by making available to everyone the fullness, relevance, and unifying force of the mystery of Christ (Cf. Col. 1: 27).

As shepherds after the Lord's own heart (Cf. Jer. 3: 15), *one of your principal tasks and joys is to lead your communities in worship and prayer*. The "[Catechism of the Catholic Church](#)" reminds us that prayer is that "enthusiasm of the heart" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. [2558](#)), which is the fruit and lifeblood of the mystery of salvation – founded on faith, strengthened by the sacraments and active in charity. In our prayer we must be careful to safeguard divine transcendence and to purify our hearts of false images (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. [2779](#)). Our prayer must always reflect the Church's true faith. The core of Christian prayer is the revelation of the Father to the "little ones" (Cf. Mt. 11: 25), his adopted children (Cf. 1Jn. 3: 1-2). In union with the Son through the Holy Spirit we are able to approach the Father and say "*Abba! Father*" (Rom. 8: 15). Not to teach this sublime truth or to teach anything less would be to fail in our responsibility to be true spiritual guides, offering the solid food of genuine Christian spirituality and helping the members of the Church to grow into full maturity in Christ (Cf. Eph. 4: 13).

You are presently involved in a revision of some liturgical texts, and this has been on the agenda of the recent Plenary Meeting of your Conference. One of your responsibilities in this regard, as stewards of the grace of the supreme priesthood (Cf. [Lumen Gentium](#), 26), is to make available exact and appropriate translations of the official liturgical books so that, following the required review and confirmation by the Holy See (Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, [can. 838, 2-3](#)), they may be an instrument and guarantee of a genuine sharing in the mystery of Christ and the Church: *lex orandi, lex credendi*.

The arduous task of translation must guard *the full doctrinal integrity* and, according to the genius of each language, the beauty of the original texts. When so many people are thirsting for the Living God (Ps. 42(41): 2) – whose majesty and mercy are at the heart of liturgical prayer – the Church must respond with *a language of praise and worship which fosters respect and gratitude for God's greatness, compassion and power*. When the faithful gather to celebrate the work of our Redemption, the language of their prayer – free from doctrinal ambiguity and ideological influence

– should foster the dignity and beauty of the celebration itself, while faithfully expressing the Church's faith and unity (Cf. John Paul II, *Vicesimus Quintus Annus*, 9 and 21).

3. From a profound spiritual renewal, from the holiness of her members and communities, the Church in the United States will draw inspiration and strength for *the new evangelization and the myriad forms of service to society* which she exercises in response to the Gospel commandment of love. American Catholics have always been noted for the generous way in which they express their faith through works of justice, charity and solidarity. Far from diminishing, the situations calling for an effective response seem daily to increase, especially in view of growing poverty, homelessness and unemployment, as well as *the crisis of values* which often brings increased self-centredness, fragmentation and aggressiveness in human relations. I can only encourage you to continue to inspire the lay faithful *to imbue America's political, social and cultural institutions with the spirit and virtue of genuine social solidarity*.

To embody the Church's social teaching in the fabric of society requires both rigorous fidelity to the Gospel and courageous creativity – a daring that knows no fear (Cf. Hebr. 13: 6) in proclaiming the kingdom of God openly and unhindered (Cf. Acts. 28: 31). Christian consciences must be awakened to *a true sense of concern for the poor and oppressed, the weak and defenseless* – who cannot be excluded from their share in the *universal destination of the earth's goods* (Cf. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 31). "There is a duty to safeguard carefully the importance of 'the poor' and of 'the option in favour of the poor' in the word of the living God" (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 37). From this there follows the task of promoting the genuinely *Christian meaning of freedom and of the liberation of humanity and of the universe* (Cf. *ibid.*). I repeat the appeal made in my Encyclical Letter on the Church's missionary mandate, in which I exhorted "the disciples of Christ and all Christian communities – from families to dioceses, from parishes to Religious Institutes – *to carry out a sincere review of their lives regarding their solidarity with the poor*" (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 60). If this examination is everywhere carried out, the Church's efforts to promote social justice will gain credibility. Since the love of Christ impels the Church to see her Spouse especially in the weak (Cf. 2Cor. 5: 14; Mt. 25: 31-46), she must ever be alert to ensure social justice and solidarity among her own members and in her own institutions.

4. In your pastoral ministry you are often challenged by *manifestations of a persistent racism* which undermines the foundations of a just and democratic society. Racism is an intolerable injustice by reason of the social conflicts which it provokes, but even more so by reason of the way in which it dishonors the inalienable dignity of all human beings, irrespective of their race or ethnic origin. Your frequent declarations on these matters, and the great variety of pastoral activities directed to the various ethnic groups present in your Dioceses, far from avowing separation or isolation among groups and communities, aim to implement the Church's vocation as the sign and instrument of the wider unity of the whole human family.

With another group of Bishops I spoke about the needs and the special contribution to the

Church's life of the large Hispanic communities in your dioceses (Cf. John Paul II, *Address to the Bishops of the United States of America on their "ad Limina" visit*, 6, 2 October 1993). In supporting a National Black Catholic Pastoral Plan (Cf. *Here I Am, Send Me*, 9 November 1989) you have shown your esteem and support for the faithful who wish to be "*truly black and authentically Catholic*". I also acknowledge your pledge to foster *solidarity with the Native American community*, especially regarding social justice in the areas of health, housing, employment and education (Cf. *Time for Remembering Reconciling and Recommitting Ourselves as a People*, 17 December 1991). The success of all of this depends greatly on efforts aimed at renewing family life, parochial schools, ministry to alienated youth, and on promoting priestly and religious vocations among the various groups.

5. Before ending this series of meetings with the United States Bishops I wish to refer, if only briefly, to your *efforts on behalf of ecumenical understanding and cooperation*.

With thankfulness to God, the Church recognizes that the Holy Spirit, "who points out the ways leading to the union of Christians" (John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 2), has brought about new attitudes between divided Christians. Guided by your country's *long struggle to implement religious freedom and tolerance*, American Catholics have enriched the Church's ecumenical commitment with the fruits of their experience.

However, after the rapid improvements made in ecumenical relations following the Second Vatican Council, some are now discouraged by the seemingly slower progress in this more mature stage of ecumenical endeavors. Because the Church is irrevocably committed to the search for Christian unity, there can be no lessening of efforts to promote common prayer, dialogue and cooperation. As Pastors you will reassure those who are disheartened, moderate those whose enthusiasm leads to doctrinal or disciplinary confusion, encourage new initiatives, and ensure that all ecumenical activity in your Dioceses is in harmony with the Church's faith and discipline (Cf. *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, n. 30, 25 March 1993). One especially relevant area of dialogue is that which concerns the ethical and moral truths necessary for the renewal of society (Cf. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 36). Christians ought to give a united witness to those moral truths which render "a primordial, indispensable and immensely valuable service not only for the individual person and his growth in the good, but also for society and its genuine development" (John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 101).

6. Dear Brother Bishops, the present season of Advent speaks to us of "the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" (Rev. 4: 8). While reminding us that Christ will come again in glory, these weeks of preparation for Christmas also lift our hearts to the "new time of advent" (John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 56) – the years of preparation for the great Jubilee commemorating the redemptive Incarnation of the Eternal Son. It is my prayer that the Church in America will prepare for that event – "as a continuation and further development of the 'fullness of time' that belongs to the ineffable mystery of the Incarnation of the Word" (John Paul II,

Redemptoris Custos, 32). With confidence I pray that under your zealous, firm and loving care each of your particular Churches will experience the "great springtime for Christianity" which God is preparing for his Church (Cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 86).

The thoughts which I have shared with the United States Bishops during this year's "ad limina" visits have been guided by the outline and content of the "*Catechism of the Catholic Church*". In your hands the *Catechism* will be an extremely effective help in making available to all the faithful the inexhaustible riches of what the Church believes, prays, celebrates and lives.

Precisely at this stage of the Church's pilgrimage the Holy Spirit has anointed us as high priests to bring the good news to the poor and heal the broken – hearted, to proclaim release to the troubled and oppressed (Cf. Lk. 4: 18-19). Sound teaching, fervent celebration of the sacraments and vigorous pastoral activity are the "treasures" we have to offer to a waiting world. With ardent hope and confidence I ask that same Holy Spirit to pour out the fullness of his gifts upon the Church in the United States. Entrusting all her members to the intercession of Mary Immaculate, Patroness of your country, I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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