



The Holy See

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

Monday, 8 November 1993

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. With great joy I welcome you – the *Bishops of New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island*: "Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come" (Rev. 1: 4). Our meeting manifests the *profound spiritual and visible communion which exists between your particular Churches and the Church Universal*, a communion which springs from our being "grafted" into Christ (Cf. Rom. 11: 17ss.). We must constantly turn to him, the chief Shepherd (Cf. 1Pt. 5: 4), in order to realize what are the "unsearchable riches" (Eph. 3: 8) with which he has invested us for the building up of the spotless spouse (Cf. Rev. 19: 7). She it is whom he unites to himself by an unbreakable covenant, and whom he unceasingly "nourishes and cherishes" (Eph. 5: 29; cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 6). Our unfailing trust and confidence rests in him and in the power of his Gospel to save (Cf. Rom. 1: 16).

Following upon the "*ad Limina*" visits of your brother Bishops from Quebec and from the West and North, your presence is a reminder of the vastness of your land which extends a *mari usque ad mare* (Cf. Ps. 72(71): 8) and which presents so many challenges for the "new evangelization". With the other Bishops I reflected on some aspects of their pastoral care of the Church and I encouraged them to be vigilant guardians of the truth, shepherds who proclaim the full truth of Christ and the Church. Today our thoughts turn to some other aspects of your ministry.

2. As *Pastors you are called to feed your flocks*, refreshing their souls (Cf. Ps. 23(22): 3) with the abundant life won by the Good Shepherd as he freely gave himself up to death on the Cross (Cf. Jn. 10: 10-11). At the centre of your sacramental ministry is the Eucharistic Sacrifice, offered to nourish the faithful with the Bread which gives life to the world (Cf. *ibid.* 6: 51). In some cases the

shortage or uneven distribution of priests makes it difficult to meet the faithful's need for the Eucharist – the very source, center and culmination of the Church's life (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 11). This situation, coupled with a critical decline in the number of Catholics attending Sunday Mass, calls for *vigorous pastoral action that is faithful to Church teaching*.

In meeting this challenge, certain fundamental principles should always guide your pastoral response. The parish is a community of the baptized who express and confirm their identity through the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice (Cf. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 26). *This requires the presence of an ordained priest* whose first privilege and irreplaceable responsibility is to offer the Eucharist *in persona Christi* (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 10; John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 48). *Great care must be taken to ensure that no misunderstanding arises about the nature of the Eucharist and its essential link with the ordained priesthood*.

When a community is deprived of the priest who acts publicly in the name of Christ (Cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2), this regrettable situation calls for an emergency response. Sunday celebrations should continue, and the lay persons who lead their brothers and sisters in prayer are exercising in a commendable way the common priesthood of all the faithful, based on the grace of Baptism. It would be a serious mistake, however, to accept this as a normal way of involving Religious and lay men and women in the Liturgy. *Such provisions should be regarded as only temporary, while the community is "in expectation of a priest"* (Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Directorium de Celebrationibus Dominicalibus Absente Presbytero, Christi Ecclesia*, 27, 2 June 1988). Your assiduous oversight is required so that all will see "the substitutional character of these celebrations, which should not be regarded as the optimal solution to new difficulties" (Ibid. 21). Your Pastoral Letter *The Ministry of Priests* (January 18, 1990) reaffirmed the Church's tradition when it stated unequivocally that "a Church without priests is unthinkable". On the contrary, the sacramental incompleteness of these celebrations should lead the whole community to pray more fervently that the Lord send laborers into his harvest (Cf. Mt. 9: 38). And I join you in pleading with him that the Church in Canada may experience a fresh springtime of priestly and religious vocations.

3. The forthcoming apostolic visitations of your seminaries will provide the Episcopal Conference of Canada with ample opportunity to reflect on ways of *improving the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation of priests*. In the light of the relevant documents of the Holy See and the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "*Pastores Dabo Vobis*", the updated *ratio fundamentalis* which you intend to draw up (Cf. *From Pain to Hope*, VII, Recommendation 50) will address the challenging task of deepening – both among the faithful and the candidates themselves – an understanding of *the ontological bond uniting the priest to Christ*, the High Priest and Good Shepherd. In this way the whole community will have a correct awareness and esteem for the priest's transcendent mission of being "the means and the living instrument for conferring God's grace" upon his people (John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 73).

4. At this time, when some question the desirability of maintaining the discipline of priestly celibacy, *Bishops must courageously teach the fittingness of linking this "sign of contradiction" with the ministerial priesthood.* On the basis of her experience and reflection, the Church has discerned, with growing clarity through the ages, that priestly celibacy is not just a legal requirement imposed as a condition for ordination. It is profoundly connected with a man's configuration to Christ, the Good Shepherd and Spouse of the Church. As "[Pastores Dabo Vobis](#)" states: "Certainly it is a grace which does not dispense with, but counts most definitely on, a conscious and free response on the part of the receiver. This charism of the Spirit also brings with it the grace for the receiver to remain faithful to it for all his life and be able to carry out generously and joyfully its concomitant commitments" (Ibid. 50).

Cultural considerations, and the scarcity of priests in certain regions, sometimes give rise to calls for a change in this discipline. *To give decisive weight to solutions based on criteria deriving more from certain currents of anthropology, sociology or psychology than from the Church's living tradition* is certainly not the path to follow. We cannot overlook the fact that the Church comes to know the divine will *through the interior guidance of the Spirit* (Cf. Jn. 16: 13), and that the difficulties involved today in keeping celibacy are not sufficient reason to overturn the Church's conviction regarding its value and appropriateness, a conviction constantly reaffirmed by the Church's Magisterium, not least by the Second Vatican Council (Cf. [Presbyterorum Ordinis](#), 16). Like the Church in other countries, the Church in Canada is called to face this situation with faith and courage, trusting "in the Spirit that the gift of celibacy... will be generously bestowed by the Father, as long as those who share in Christ's priesthood through the Sacrament of Orders, and indeed the whole Church, humbly and earnestly pray for it" ([Presbyterorum Ordinis](#), 16).

The scandal given by those members of the clergy and those Religious who have failed in this regard has been a source of great suffering for the Church in Canada. I wish you to know that *I have personally shared this anguish with you* and that it has been the cause of much prayer to the "Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (2Cor. 1: 3) for those who have been victims of sexual misconduct, as well as for those who have been guilty of it. Let us abide by Saint Paul's sound counsel: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12: 21). Recalling with profound gratitude the fidelity and zeal of *so many* priests in Canada who, with pure and selfless hearts, have made the total gift of themselves to Christ and his Church, I ask you to convey my encouragement to every priest whose father in God you are (Cf. [Christus Dominus](#), 16).

5. Among your pastoral concerns, you are also called upon to address the vital question of the role of women, with their rights and duties, in your particular Churches and in Canadian society. The whole People of God needs to recognize and rejoice in *the irreplaceable gifts of "feminine genius" that women bring to the life and mission of the Church* (Cf. John Paul II, [Christifideles Laici](#), 51). These rich gifts of femininity originate with the first covenant of creation, which confers on woman "an expression of the 'image and likeness of God' that is specifically hers" (John Paul II, [Mulieris Dignitatem](#), 10). In the New Covenant, which seals the redemptive union of Christ and the Church

(Cf. Eph. 5: 32), women enjoy a special priority in the "order of love" (Cf. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 29).

Since "God entrusts the human being to her in a special way" (John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 30), woman's commitment to the home, marriage and family should not be seen as restrictive or demeaning. Rather that commitment reflects, in a profound and specific, though not exclusive way, the love which God himself has for his creation insofar as he cares personally for every one of his sons and daughters (Cf. 1Jn. 4: 16). In this perspective it constitutes a serious pastoral responsibility, as well as a matter of charity and justice, to foster the authentic advancement of women, *which will be achieved only if it is anchored in the truth of creation and of divine Revelation*.

6. Dans les mois qui nous séparent de la tenue du Synode de 1994 sur la vie consacrée et son rôle dans l'Eglise et le monde, je voudrais inviter les religieux et les religieuses du Canada à se préparer à cet événement par une prière toujours plus fervente. La vie religieuse est un don de l'Esprit "à" l'Eglise et "pour" l'Eglise. Le vaste ensemble d'écoles et d'hôpitaux catholiques existant chez vous n'aurait jamais pu être constitué, et il ne pourrait poursuivre ses missions, sans l'esprit d'initiative, la détermination et le don d'elles-mêmes de milliers de religieux et de religieuses. Je pense en particulier aux travaux héroïques de sainte Marguerite Bourgeoys, de sainte Marguerite d'Youville – les premières saintes nées au Canada – et de la bienheureuse Marie-Léonie Paradis dont j'ai présidé la béatification au cours de ma visite pastorale dans votre pays.

Cependant vous êtes tous inquiets de voir que, dans certains groupes, l'idéal de la vie religieuse n'exerce plus le même attrait depuis quelques années; nous espérons que les religieux et les religieuses canadiens mettront à profit l'occasion fournie par le Synode "pour réfléchir à nouveau à la question de leur renouveau, à la lumière des défis et des possibilités de notre temps" (*Lineamenta*, n. 33). *Il est particulièrement urgent pour eux de méditer sur leur identité et sur le charisme de leur fondation*. Dans un esprit d'humilité profonde et en s'en remettant à Celui dont la puissance agissant en nous est capable de faire bien au-delà, infiniment au-delà de tout ce que nous pouvons demander ou concevoir" (Eph. 3, 20), les religieux et les religieuses devraient s'interroger sur le renouveau proposé par le deuxième Concile du Vatican: a-t-il été effectivement mis en œuvre (Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2) et a-t-il porté les fruits de sainteté et de zèle apostolique qui étaient attendus? Vous êtes pasteurs de toute la communauté de vos diocèses, et votre ministère concerne les religieux présents dans vos Eglises particulières. Ils ont besoin de votre soutien et de vos orientations non seulement pour leurs activités pastorales mais aussi pour promouvoir l'observation des conseils évangéliques par lesquels ils sont "aconsacrés à Dieu en Jésus-Christ pour lui appartenir exclusivement" (Jean-Paul II, *Redemptionis Donum*, 7).

7. Chers frères dans l'Episcopat, nous arrivons au soir du II^{ème} millénaire qui déjà touche à son terme (Cf. Luc. 24, 29).

Vous, pasteurs de l'Église au Canada, je vous invite à commencer les préparatifs du grand Jubilé de l'Incarnation rédemptrice de notre Seigneur. Par-dessus tout, dans les différents moments de la vie pastorale, fortifiez et encouragez un nouvel "élan de sainteté" (Cf. Jean-Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 90) chez les prêtres, les religieux, les religieuses et les laïcs.

Comme des pasteurs selon le cœur du Seigneur (Cf. Jer. 3, 15), conduisez les fidèles catholiques aux sources de la vie: "La vie éternelle, c'est qu'ils te connaissent, toi, le seul véritable Dieu, et celui que tu as envoyé, Jésus-Christ" (Jn. 17, 3).

Recourant à l'intercession des saints du Canada, et vous confiant, avec tous ceux dont vous avez la charge pastorale, à la protection bienveillante de Notre-Dame, je vous accords de grand cœur ma Bénédiction Apostolique.

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