



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, 2 October 1993

Dear Brother Bishops,

"Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father... comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word" (2 Thess. 2: 16).

1. With this prayer I welcome you – the *Bishops of Alaska, Arkansas, Idaho, Montana, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas and Washington* – on the occasion of your "*ad Limina*" visit. Through you I warmly greet each member of the Churches in which the Holy Spirit has made you his overseers (Cf. Acts. 20:28). In a special way I thank God for the *profound solidarity – sacramental and fraternal – which unites us in the episcopal ministry* for the service of God's beloved people.

The Second Vatican Council reminded Bishops that it is their "duty to promote and safeguard the unity of faith and the discipline common to the whole Church" (*Lumen Gentium*, 23). Like the Apostles, who were missionaries with a mission extending far beyond a local community, we are "ambassadors for Christ" (2Cor. 5: 20), called to serve the Church's catholic unity and communion through a *pastoral solicitude which embraces the whole Body of Christ*. Through your union with the body of Bishops, your particular Churches remain open to universal *koinonia*, they welcome and receive the fullness of the apostolic faith, and they enrich the Church by contributing the wealth of their own gifts. Each of you is a living instrument of unity and catholicity, nourishing your particular Church's fidelity to Christ by fostering the bonds of ecclesial communion with the Successor of Peter and the other members of the Episcopal College.

2. One of the recurring themes of this series of "*ad Limina*" reflections with the Bishops of the United States has been the *urgent need for a genuine spiritual and moral renewal* in the Church

and in society. In the period remaining before the turn of the millennium and the great Jubilee celebration recalling the mystery of the Son's Redemptive Incarnation, *the Holy Spirit is summoning the Church to purification, repentance and renewed spiritual fervor*. The whole Church needs to respond generously to this call, lest the grace of the millennium be offered in vain (Cf. *ibid.* 6: 1). For your Diocesan communities it is a question of ever greater commitment to being the salt of the earth and the light of the world in a society which is more and more fragmented through a loss of spiritual vision and purpose. For many people the truth of God's loving providence over creation and of the grace of salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ is less and less a vital part of their lives. The radical pastoral challenge which the Church and her members are facing at the end of the twentieth century is to show the relevance of the Gospel message for the individual's transcendent destiny, as well as for authentic human development.

In God's design, the Second Vatican Council constituted an outpouring of divine light and assistance, enabling the Church to meet with full confidence and security the challenges of the present. Our episcopal ministry must be decidedly oriented to the renewal and strengthening of the Church called for by the Council, so that through her activity – in the words of "[Gaudium et Spes](#)" – "the world might be fashioned anew according to God's design and might reach its fulfilment" ([Gaudium et Spes](#), 2). The path of ecclesial reform passes through the ecclesiology of communion, which is the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents (Cf. Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, 1985, *Final Report*). Flowing from the living wellspring of sacred tradition, the ecclesiology of *koinonia* can bring the Church that necessary and authentic reform, that true ecclesial *metánoia* which "is to be measured not primarily in terms of external structures, but in deeper and more effective implementation of the core vision of her true nature and mission" (John Paul II, [Address to the Bishops of the United States of America in Los Angeles](#), 16 September 1987).

3. Ecclesial communion in fact is a profound reality which reaches into the very heart of the Trinitarian Mystery, wherein the real distinction of Persons in no way diminishes the unity of the Godhead. *The vertical dimension of communion* – the love of God poured forth into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Cf. Rom. 5: 5), which raises us to new life in Jesus Christ – is the fundamental and central experience of our Christian life. This grace, which reaches its fulfillment only in the heavenly Church where "God may be everything to every one" (1Cor. 15: 28), *is the end for which every human person is created in his image and likeness* (Cf. [Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1720-1722](#)). It is the sublime mystery of God's saving love which the Church must always proclaim in her teaching, celebrate in her sacraments and foster in all her life and activity. Every aspect of Church renewal, whether in the Liturgy, in catechesis, or in pastoral and canonical practice and discipline, must have as its goal the revitalization and growth of grace in our hearts, the deepening of communion with the Triune God.

For all its sublimity, the communion of which we are speaking is not a distant, abstract reality. It is the very foundation of the organization and activity of the Church at every level. It follows that the

ministries, organisms and relationships which foster ecclesial communion *in its horizontal dimension* must have one overriding purpose: they must serve to bring people to Christ, they must lead the baptized to grow in faith, hope and love, and they must build up the body of Christ in unity of faith and discipline.

4. Since the Council, and as formulated by the Code of Canon Law, *the theology of communion within the Church* has led to the widespread setting-up of *consultative structures at different levels*. The effective participation of the faithful in the Church's mission, through parish councils, financial councils, committees for specific activities on both the parish and diocesan level, is an important development in the life of your Dioceses. You are well aware of the successes of this process, but also of the difficulties which remain to be solved, with regard to the educational and formation base of lay cooperators, and in forging more explicit bonds with the Dioceses and parishes in which the laity serve. Through its Committee on the Laity, your Conference has issued helpful guidelines for those serving on parish councils, in order to acquaint them with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council on the role of the laity and the application of that teaching found in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "[Christifideles Laici](#)".

Lay people, "by reason of the knowledge, competence, or outstanding ability which they enjoy, are able and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on things which concern the good of the Church" ([Lumen Gentium](#), 37). They can do this either individually or through appropriate bodies (Cf. Congregation for the Clergy, *Omnes Christifideles*, 25 January 1973). It is therefore incumbent upon the Church's Pastors to be attentive to the suggestions and proposals of the lay faithful, while at the same time exercising the freedom and authority which is theirs by divine right to shepherd that part of God's people entrusted to them.

It would be an error to judge *ecclesial structures of participation and cooperation* by secular democratic standards, or to consider them as forms of "power-sharing" or means of imposing partisan ideas or interests. They should be looked on as forms of spiritual solidarity proper to the Church as a communion of persons who, "though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Rom. 12: 5). Such structures are fruitful to the extent that they manifest the true nature of the Church as a hierarchical communion, animated and guided by the Holy Spirit.

When they function according to the spirit of Christ, they are valid signs of how the baptized bear one another's burdens (Cf. Gal. 6: 2) in ways that are appropriate for a community enriched by differentiated hierarchical and charismatic gifts (Cf. [Lumen Gentium](#), 4).

5. Many other forms of lay participation in the Church's mission call for your attention and pastoral leadership. One significant measure of the vitality of the Catholic community in the United States is the growing number of *lay people who serve as missionaries or volunteers*, either for a limited period or permanently. Another is the extensive network of lay movements and organizations

active in your country. The National Lay Forum under the auspices of your Conference's Committee on the Laity is a deserving initiative which can stimulate serious reflection on the lay apostolate, as well as being an incentive for organizations and movements to collaborate more explicitly with one another and with the Bishops. I offer prayers for the success of the next Forum which will be held in 1994 and which will focus on the impact of faith on culture in contemporary American society.

Likewise, the growth of *small Christian communities* especially within the boundaries of parishes is both a means of formation for lay people and an impetus for mission to the world. In most cases these communities serve to enliven parish life by being active instruments of evangelization and mission. In some cases sensitive pastoral leadership is required in order to ensure that they remain in full communion and harmony with the local Church. "[Christifideles Laici](#)" contains appropriate criteria and guidelines for the integration of small communities into the wider ecclesial body (Cf. [Christifideles Laici](#), 30).

6. Some of your Dioceses have a very high Hispanic Catholic population, which means above all that your ministry must take account of *the richness of religious expression and cultural diversity that characterizes the Hispanic community and demands appropriate pastoral programs and initiatives*. Among the principal pastoral tasks in relation to the Hispanic community is that of evangelization and catechesis, especially in the face of extremely active proselytism by other religious groups. Leaders in the Catholic Hispanic community frequently point to the need to sustain the family within a community of faith and solidarity, especially through small ecclesial communities that are personal and relevant to the everyday lives of their members. Ministry to young Hispanics should not overlook the importance of transmitting a genuine and demanding spirituality centered on the knowledge and love of Christ the Redeemer and directed to incarnating the spirit of the Beatitudes in daily living. In the end, the success of the Church's efforts will greatly depend on the fostering of native – born vocations among Hispanic men and women, and the appropriate formation of seminarians and religious, with standards no less challenging than those used for other candidates.

The Missions of the Southwest testify to the fact that the first evangelizers of many of your Dioceses, who spoke Spanish, left a distinct and abiding mark on the religious and cultural traditions of the region. In these traditions there are many values which can serve today as effective channels of a deeper and more effective evangelization. I would ask you to take my heartfelt good wishes and prayerful encouragement to all those involved in the pastoral care of the Hispanic Catholics of the United States.

7. A constant concern of the Church's Pastors must be the question of whether Catholic laity are receiving *a continuing theological and spiritual formation, including formation in the Church's social doctrine*, of a sufficiently high level to enable them to fulfil their role in the Church and in society. This formation should be arranged in such a way as to meet practical difficulties at the parish level

where so many secular interests compete for people's attention.

One particular problem, which touches the heart of the Church's communion in faith, is the confusion and even scandal caused by Catholics in public office or in the media who advance positions contrary to Church teaching. This is a matter which calls for sensitive leadership on your part. I encourage you in your efforts to offer a clear defense of authentic Catholic doctrine and to foster a better understanding of the "religious assent" of mind and heart required of all the Church's members (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 25).

8. Dear Brother Bishops, your presence calls to mind these and other great responsibilities which you face in shepherding the part of God's people entrusted to your care. May the maternal mediation of the Immaculate Mother of God, Patroness of your country, obtain for you – and all the priests, Religious, lay men and women of your Dioceses – an ever deeper faith, livelier hope and more ardent charity! With my Apostolic Blessing.

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