



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE ECCLESIASTICAL PROVINCES OF
AGRA, GUWAHATI, IMPHAL AND SHILLONG
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 25 November 1995

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. Continuing this series of *ad Limina* visits by the Bishops of India, today I have the great joy of greeting the *Pastors of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Agra, Guwahati, Imphal and Shillong*: "Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come" (Rev. 1:4). As the liturgical year draws to a close, Holy Church once again directs her gaze to the glorious coming of the Lord of history, who will, in his own time, bring to fulfilment the promised Kingdom. Until then, God's people on earth walk in faith amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God, announcing the cross and death of the Lord until he comes (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 8). On this pilgrimage the faithful are guided by the Successors of the Apostles, "linked with one another and with the Bishop of Rome by the bonds of unity, charity and peace" (*Lumen Gentium*, 22). We have gathered together today to reflect on the ministry that the Spirit entrusted to us through Episcopal Ordination, and to recommit ourselves to it with full confidence in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2. The local Churches of India are full ecclesial realities insofar as they arise in and from the universal Church (cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Communio Notio*, 9). By recognizing the apostolic ministry of the College of Bishops, involving as it does the unique charism which Christ entrusted to Peter as the Shepherd of his flock (cf. Jn. 21:15-17), each particular Church reflects fully the one Church of Christ. The *Petrine service of unity is intrinsic to each local Church*: "All the Churches are in full and visible communion, because all the Pastors are in communion with Peter and therefore united to Christ" (John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, 94). Just as the Bishop of Rome is the *principal guardian of the Church's unity*, my mission also requires me

to be the primary advocate of her *catholicity*, which excludes certain forms of attachment to one's own cultural, regional or national identity which harm the universal openness and love that ought to inspire Christ's followers. I rejoice therefore to see the ways in which, through an exchange of gifts – spiritual and human resources above all – your Dioceses seek to put into practice what the Second Vatican Council stated: "The whole and each of the parts are strengthened by the common sharing of all things and by the common effort to attain to fullness in unity" (*Lumen Gentium*, 13).

3. In a few days time we shall commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church. In the words of that memorable document, *the Church's mission* to bring the light of the Gospel to every nation *is grounded in the eternal love of the Blessed Trinity*: "The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, for it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she takes her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father" (*Ad Gentes*, 2). As Pastors of the Church in India, your personal commitment must be to fan into flame the fire of love lit by the Lord's saving death and Resurrection. You must constantly ask yourselves: How can we more effectively lead people to the discovery and deeper experience of "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8)?

4. A twofold challenge faces the Catholic community in India. On the one hand, the Holy Spirit is urging you to take the Good News to all those who have not yet heard it. On the other hand, each particular Church, each parish community and each religious institute is being challenged to open itself with fresh fervour to being evangelized anew. I urge you to inspire the faithful to focus their attention on the *primary objective of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000*: "a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and personal renewal in a context of ever more intense prayer and of solidarity with one's neighbour, especially the most needy" (John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 42). The Holy Spirit will undoubtedly bring forth a rich harvest from your efforts to evangelize, provided that those endeavours are built on sound Christology, soteriology and ecclesiology, authentic inculturation, the tireless dedication of the agents of evangelization and the efficacy of the structures which serve it.

5. In view of our responsibility to meet this immense challenge, I cannot fail to reflect with you on the fact that the Church must – always and everywhere – scrupulously safeguard the truth about her Bridegroom, the truth which alone sets people free (cf. Jn. 8:32). Among the principal duties of Bishops is that of ensuring respect for the right of every person to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed in its fullness and integrity. Here I am thinking particularly of *your need to be vigilant* with respect to teachings which minimize the universal destination of the Gospel, by playing down the uniqueness of the Revelation which culminated in the new and everlasting Covenant established by the Blood of Christ, and which is faithfully preserved down the ages in the Church's faith and teaching.

Christ, the Son of God made man, is the one, perfect, definitive and unsurpassable Word of the

Father. He is the "mediator and fullness of all Revelation" (*Dei Verbum*, 2), the only Redeemer of all humanity. "No one, therefore, can enter into communion with God except through Christ, by the working of the Holy Spirit" (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 5). Likewise, *the Church is the universal sacrament of salvation, the divinely chosen sign and instrument through which Christ's saving grace is offered to all*. In order for the Church in India to remain steadfast in its fidelity to the Lord, it is essential to ensure that the harmony, beauty and power of the truths of faith are understood and loved, most especially in seminaries, houses of formation and institutes of higher learning.

6. At the same time, the effectiveness of both the new evangelization and the mission *ad gentes* depends on proclaiming "the truth of the Gospel" (Gal. 2:14) in a way that is persuasive and relevant. Evangelization is inextricably linked to the profound, gradual and exacting process of inculturation, a process which poses a permanent challenge to the Church in all parts of the world. *The Good News of Redemption must "take flesh" in the various cultures of your vast sub-continent, so that God's praises may be sung by each people in its own "tongue"*. Genuine inculturation is achieved only where the core of a culture is enlightened and strengthened by the truths and values of Revelation, and where people respond to the call to holiness by being *true to Christ*, Eternal Wisdom, who transforms all aspects of life, including our cultural and social heritage. Pastoral efforts to promote inculturation will not just concentrate on externals, as if it were the result of a hasty or superficial adaptation of the customs and values of those to whom the word of God is preached. Rather your efforts in this field must lead to the building of communities whose very existence and unity springs from faith-filled prayer, joyous celebration of the sacraments and life lived in accordance with the demands of the Gospel. Inculturation succeeds particularly well where couples and families embody the Christian vision of their vocation and responsibilities. Bishops – through their attitude of attentive listening, community dialogue and discernment – must ensure that the ways in which the Gospel is expressed and lived among their people are always fully compatible with the apostolic deposit of faith and the bonds of ecclesial communion (cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 54).

7. As many of your quinquennial reports have mentioned, the experience of your local Churches has convinced you that the success of the Church's mission in India involves bearing united witness to Christ *in a programme of pastoral solidarity*. People increasingly look first to the messengers, to the authenticity of their lives, before they consider the message itself. In the Upper Room, when the Lord gave his new commandment, he revealed how he would draw people to himself: "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn. 13:35). The witness borne by the peace, spirit of co-operation and holiness of each Christian community within itself and in its relations with others intensifies the Church's effectiveness as the sign of God's love. This witness, which ought to be particularly visible in the fraternal union of the Bishops themselves, is indispensable if the task of evangelization is to be carried out as God wills. *I urge the whole Church in India to be consecrated in evangelical love*, so that, seeing that Christ's disciples live in self-giving service and solidarity, those who have not yet accepted the Good News

may come to believe (cf. *ibid.* 17:21-23)!

8. Within your vast country, Christians are a tiny and sometimes beleaguered minority. Yet they are called to be a leaven in the dough (cf. Mt. 13:33) and a light on a lampstand (cf. *ibid.*, 5:15-16). Despite innumerable hardships, many priests, religious and lay people have borne heroic witness to their fidelity to the Lord. I pray that the Holy Spirit, "the principal agent of the whole of the Church's mission" (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 21), will continue to stir up among the People of God in India the courage, fervour and enthusiasm which marked the first Christian communities! I urge parents, priests, catechists and all those who serve the People of God to foster a new ardour for holiness in order to give fresh impulse to charity.

For their part, *religious institutes*, especially the many flourishing Congregations of Sisters, play an indispensable part in bringing the Good News to the men and women of our time, in particular to the poor and to those who yearn, often without knowing it, for the fullness of life (cf. Col. 2:10). Important as it is for religious to give the best of themselves in their apostolic works, they contribute to evangelization above all by their total consecration to the Lord. They must let themselves be ever more deeply evangelized, so that Christ's light may penetrate their hearts and enable them to radiate that same light to others. Should not those who follow the path of the evangelical counsels bear special witness to a spirituality rooted in loving contemplation, detachment from the world and a spirit of sacrifice?

9. As many of you have said to me, the *laity* in your particular Churches are becoming increasingly aware that, by virtue of their Baptism and Confirmation, they *have a specific mission to build up the Body of Christ*. While we cannot forget that "the vocation of the lay faithful to holiness implies that life according to the Spirit expresses itself in a particular way in their involvement in temporal affairs and in their participation in earthly activities" (John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 17), it is also true that lay men and women should be, structurally involved in the life of every parish and Diocese. If lay people sometimes feel that their right to participate in Church life is ignored, Bishops must work to establish a *climate of confidence and partnership* among all members of Christ's Body.

10. I wish you to know, dear Brothers in Christ, of the unceasing prayer I offer for each of you personally and for all your people. As the third millennium draws near, we should be convinced that the best *preparation for that Great Jubilee* "can only be expressed in a renewed commitment to apply, as faithfully as possible, the teachings of Vatican II to the life of every individual and of the whole Church" (John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 20). This is what the Spirit is saying to the Church in India (cf. Rev. 2:7-8)! I commend all of you – together with the priests, religious and laity entrusted to your pastoral care – to the maternal intercession of Mary, who lovingly guides our pilgrimage towards the fullness of the Kingdom. With my Apostolic Blessing.

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