



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE CATHOLIC HIERARCHY OF EGYPT ON
THEIR "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" VISIT**

Tuesday, 24 June 1997

Your Beatitude,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I welcome you with great joy and brotherly affection on the occasion of your *ad limina* visit. Your coming to Rome is first and foremost a pilgrimage to the tomb of the Apostles Peter and Paul, examples of witnessing to Christ to the point of bloodshed; it also expresses the communion of the local Churches, spread throughout the world, with the Successor of Peter. Your presence in the Eternal City, shortly before the feast of the blessed Apostles, emphasizes the aspect of unity among all Catholic communities. I thank your Patriarch for his kind words, which allow me to be close to the faithful whose Pastors you are.

As I receive you here, I am thinking of your communities; they are the heirs of the Evangelist St Mark who brought the Gospel to your region almost 2,000 years ago, after he himself had been strengthened in his faith and mission by contemplation of the Lord and by closeness to the Apostles. I pray that the Christians in your Dioceses, after the example of their forebears, may be authentic disciples of Christ, drawing strength for their witness from reading the Gospel and from the sacraments. In the Church you are called to show Christ's face to your land, so that our contemporaries may discover the splendour and light of our God, who illumines all human action and gives life its full meaning.

2. Through your Episcopal ordination, you have been chosen to lead the People of God, to teach them and to organize the various diocesan services with affective and effective charity. You wish to be close to your priests and faithful, thus forming united communities in which each person is prepared to help and support his brothers and sisters. I am particularly pleased by the relations of trusting, fraternal collaboration you foster with your diocesan priests, based "before all else on

supernatural charity” (Second Vatican Council, *Christus Dominus*, n. 28). They are sometimes painfully burdened with the weight of the day and difficult situations. Support them in their spiritual life, because their apostolate depends above all on being close to the Master, who gives them the grace for pastoral service and the courage to engage in prophetic acts of dialogue and reconciliation.

With you, I urge priests not to neglect their time of personal prayer and meditation. Life in intimacy with Christ shapes their inmost being and day by day conforms them to the High Priest. By diligently celebrating the *Liturgy of the Hours*, alone or with others, they join in the prayer of the whole Church and become aware that the primary mission of the ordained minister is each day to offer to God the people of our time, so that the Lord may make them a holy people and instill in them his Spirit.

In order to exercise their ministry, priests must also have suitable living conditions, which allow them to dedicate themselves to their pastoral tasks. I know how attentive you are to seeing that in every Eparchy the sacred ministers have the same benefits and social protection, so that they can devote themselves unreservedly to their responsibilities with no apprehension about the future.

I would like to acknowledge the courage and the patient work of priests, and in particular their ministry of presence. They are eager to meet their faithful regularly, to help them live their Christian life and deepen their understanding of the sacraments, and to support them in the various decisions they must make each day. You also emphasize the care they take in proclaiming the Gospel in their Sunday homilies, prepared with great attention and deep pedagogical care. Thus they introduce the faithful into the mystery of Christian dogma. In this area, thanks to the catechetical programmes established at the level of the parish, Eparchy and the whole local Church, and thanks to your teaching, the faithful are strengthened in their faith so as to become sound witnesses. The function of catechetical instruction “is to develop in men a living, explicit and active faith, enlightened by doctrine” (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Christus Dominus*, n. 14).

3. In your episcopal office, pay particular attention to the pastoral care of vocations, by exercising attentive discernment of candidates for the priesthood and by forming seminarians to be ready to become your closest co-workers. The Church's future vitality depends to a great extent on the attention we pay to preparation for the priesthood. Do not hesitate to call young people to consecrate themselves totally and radically to Christ. For their part, priests can lead young men to commit themselves to following Christ in the ordained ministry by their own radiance and spiritual joy.

4. I give thanks to the Lord for the long tradition and rich history of the Coptic Catholic Church and for the active apostolate of all the faithful. You show your fraternal ties during your various periodic meetings. In fact, within the patriarchal institutions, you actively co-operate in setting up the

necessary structures for better pastoral endeavour, taking care to involve closely in your mission the different commissions of the Patriarchate and the Eparchies, priests, religious and laity.

5. You have now worked out a marriage preparation programme to help the faithful understand the meaning of this sacrament and fully assume their responsibilities as spouses and parents, with respect for the meaning of sexuality in marriage lived according to God's plan, for the dignity of woman and for the value of every human life entrusted to them by the Creator. Those priests and lay people called to assist engaged couples should receive suitable theological, spiritual and psychological formation so that they can present the Church's thought in this area. The serious preparation of young people for married life is especially important, because they are called to be witnesses to Christ for their children and their fellow countrymen by their exemplary lives and their specific moral decisions. Their brothers and sisters will discover the joy of living in the freedom of God's children.

I am pleased with what you have done to reform the different rites and to translate them into modern language, guided by the desire to maintain your particular liturgical and spiritual patrimony and to transmit it to the young generations. You thus enable the Christian people to have a better understanding of Christian dogma and to take part more actively in the Divine Liturgy.

6. It is an eloquent sign for people, that, among all the Catholic communities of Egypt, there is a just distribution of goods and gifts by which God's love is manifested. I thank the local Churches and the movements that support you financially. I encourage them to continue and to intensify their efforts on behalf of your Eparchies. There must also be more and more sharing within your Patriarchate, so that the Eparchies receiving more subsidies will aid those that are poorer and recently established. Thus you will carry out among yourselves and with your brothers and sisters from other countries a charitable work like the one that existed in apostolic times, when "the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brethren who lived in Judea" (Acts 11:29).

7. The Coptic Catholic Patriarchate and the Latin Vicariate in your country have a long tradition of education. I know of the sacrifices that this work involves for your communities. By offering free instruction in certain schools, you are taking into account the current living conditions that sometimes threaten family life, since fewer and fewer families have the means to meet their basic needs in raising and educating the young. Priests, religious and lay people are involved in the intellectual training of Egyptian youth, both Christian and Muslim. Furthermore, the educational community is involved in developing young people's whole personality by holding up to them essential human, spiritual and moral values, respectful of those who do not share Christian beliefs; but parents who enrol their children in Catholic schools must accept the fact that Christ's disciples cannot be silent about the Christian values on which their beliefs, their teaching and their way of life are based.

Please convey my warm encouragement to everyone who is involved in this service to individuals and to the Church. May teachers and parents remember that the young need models and that school is a place of friendship and social integration, where each one is called to recognize the other, to accept him with his own sensitivity and to recognize him as a brother. Young people will thus learn that what matters most for building up society is solidarity among all and respect for each individual. These are the essential conditions for peace and for the development of individuals. We appreciate the attention given by the Egyptian authorities and all your fellow citizens to the high quality of instruction and to the human and moral education given in Catholic schools, as well as to the commitment of the faithful to charitable activities and to health care and social assistance.

8. In your quinquennial reports you have recalled the fraternal bonds that unite you with the Coptic Orthodox Church and the opportunities for collaboration that are offered at the level of religious education and charitable assistance. These are the first steps in the ecumenical dialogue, which call for others. I would like to invite you to continue your openness to the other Churches and your ecumenical relations with them. I also gladly share the sufferings you told me about, which you experience regarding the misunderstandings of those who are your dear brothers and sisters and with whom you share the and spiritual tradition and desire to make the Lord known and loved. Despite the difficulties, may Catholic Pastors and faithful never tire of making fraternal gestures! May they remember that love calls for love and that a charitable attitude is an invitation to reciprocity! Witnesses to charity help to re-establish and maintain a calm atmosphere among the Churches and to find ways for solving the problems which are still an obstacle to full communion. In this area I rejoice at the tangible signs made by your communities to help generously the Coptic Orthodox Church, particularly the transfer of churches, which enables them to celebrate the Divine Liturgy with their faithful.

Dialogue and *rapprochement* do not in the least prevent each community from respecting the sensitivities of the other ones, as well as their specific way of expressing our common faith in Christ and of celebrating the sacraments, which Churches must mutually recognize as taking place in the name of the same Lord. In fact, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* clearly recalls that “Baptism constitutes the foundation of communion among all Christians” (n. 1271), for it is “the sacramental bond of unity existing among all those who through it are reborn” (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 22).

9. It is important that all people of goodwill join forces to reduce the misunderstandings, ruptures and divisions that can hamper daily life; everyone must work so that all groups in a country’s population, even the smallest, are shown the respect and attention to which they have a right in society, and that every person is recognized as a fully-fledged citizen. In the area of defending individuals and peoples, the Church has a particular mission within each nation. She “feels challenged by the specific responsibility of healing these divisions” (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 49), and to build bridges between all the cultural elements of a

people. In this spirit, the Church tirelessly invites Christians and Muslims to strive sincerely for mutual understanding, as well as to protect and to promote together social justice, moral values, peace and freedom for all people. As the Catholic Patriarchs of the East recently recalled: "Islam is not the enemy, but the partner in a dialogue indispensable for the building of a new human civilization". Likewise: "Christianity ... is not the enemy, but the basic partner in the indispensable dialogue for building a new world" (*Third Pastoral Letter*, Christmas 1994, n. 40).

Hence Christians have the legitimate right and duty to be involved in public life and to put their skills at the service of local groups, to participate in the building up of society, in peace between all and in the administration of the common good. In her teaching, the Church has frequently recalled the principles of justice and equity in participating in social life. In fact, no one can be excluded from the *res publica* in the name of his political or religious opinions. Each specific culture is always marked by the religious and civil contributions of the different civilizations which have prevailed in a specific region and which must be considered elements of the common culture (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Une espérance nouvelle pour le Liban*, n. 93). Thus it is the task of social leaders to guarantee the necessary freedom to religious and moral life, in the name of simple reciprocity, without excluding the people to which one belongs and loves, because they are one's roots and the people of one's ancestors. In this perspective, I invite the Christians of your communities not to tire in being the leaven of harmony and reconciliation.

10. In your reports you stressed the important place of men and women religious among the Egyptian people in areas such as education, health care, charitable activities, the promotion of woman's equality with man, and relations with Christians of other denominations and with Muslims. Please convey my cordial greetings to them. I give thanks to the Lord for what he has enabled them to accomplish. In the midst of human society, consecrated persons prophetically recall, through the practice of the evangelical counsels, that Christ is first and that he can fulfil those who are committed to following him. The Christian people need men and women who are totally dedicated to the Lord and to their brothers and sisters, and can express this love of God and neighbour in consistent choices and concrete projects. I am grateful to the congregations and institutes for regularly sending new persons to your country, to respond to the most urgent pastoral needs.

11. Beloved Brothers of the Coptic Catholic Church, you must face numerous difficulties in the growth of your communities, which do not always have the places of worship necessary for their liturgical gatherings, and whose faithful are sometimes driven to leave their Church merely because of the social conditions in which Christians live. May you be able to give the members of your Eparchies the spiritual means for standing firm in the faith among their fellow citizens, so that the Church remains legitimately present and visible in this country!

I recently went to [Lebanon](#) to present to that country's Christians the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Une espérance nouvelle pour le Liban*, the fruit of the Special Assembly of the Synod

of Bishops. I also invite you to give attention to this document, which includes aspects on the different Eastern Catholic communities and their links with people of other religions.

12. Your Beatitude, I would like to offer you my warm wishes on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of your episcopal ordination, to stir up in you the gift of God received through the imposition of hands. I also address my cordial greetings to all of you and to all your priests who are celebrating the anniversary of their ordination in this month of June. I pray the Holy Spirit to accompany you and to fill you with his gifts! My prayer is also joined to all the Catholics of the Coptic rite and of the Latin Vicariate Apostolic. Please convey to them all the affectionate greeting and warm encouragement of Peter's Successor. May Christ's disciples never lose hope amid the difficulties of the present time, and may the Spirit inspire sentiments of harmony and peace in everyone! Through the intercession of the Apostle St Mark, I wholeheartedly grant my Apostolic Blessing to you and to the members of the People of God entrusted to your pastoral care.

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