



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE Bishops' Conference of France
ON THEIR "Ad limina Apostolorum" VISIT**

Saturday, 15 March 1997

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I welcome you with joy on the occasion of your pilgrimage to the tombs of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul and of your *ad limina* visit, an event which expresses the communion of the local Churches throughout the world with the Successor of Peter, and their trusting co-operation with the different services of the Holy See. I thank Bishop Maurice Gaidon, your President, for presenting the important aspects of your ministry to me: your joys and your reasons for gratitude because you perceive the work of the Spirit in human hearts, and the questions which you encounter daily in your mission. Our meetings enable me to be close to the clergy and the faithful of the Dioceses of which you are the Pastors.

Among the elements of renewal and the needs you have pointed out in your quinquennial reports, today I am emphasizing everything that has to do with catechesis and young people. It is precisely these two aspects that I would like to recall with you; in the spirit which inspired the *spring meeting of the Bishops of France in 1996*, I encourage you to continue and intensify your activity with young people, for the Church's concern must be directed especially to them.

2. First of all you stress the wish of many families for guidance in *arousing the faith of the very young*. Parents are sometimes bewildered by childrens' questions; they then feel the need to turn to their pastors. It is often an occasion for them to revive their own faith and to return to a more intense sacramental practice. At home, children wonder about God from the earliest age; there they can be given the first answers to their questions and can be introduced to conversation with the Lord and learn to trust in his goodness as a Father. But the very pedagogy of Christian prayer

presupposes that adults give an example of personal prayer and meditation on the Word of God. We must therefore encourage parents to become aware of their mission as teachers of the faith and to ask for the support of priests and of lay people formed in this aspect of pastoral care.

3. To satisfy the specific demands of children's religious education, you have taken pains to suggest catechetical instruction which develops the Christian mystery at all levels. In fact, catechesis requires well-planned programmes, inspired by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, presenting the different elements of the *Creed*. Moreover, in studying sacred history, children learn to know the great biblical figures, and take as examples those who prepared the coming of the Lord, so as to know Christ and in, turn, to become his disciples. At an age when formation takes place by offering models of Christian life, identification with the men and women of the Old and New Testaments and the saints of our history is an important dimension of spiritual education. You also note that more and more *school-age children* ask for Baptism; one can only rejoice at this renewal, which calls for great attention, since it shows that children can discover the value of the sacraments: let us help them participate regularly.

4. *Specialized catechesis* is also experiencing a new growth. I salute the people who are willing to help handicapped children receive a suitable catechesis and benefit from proper spiritual assistance. With all their heart and despite their suffering, these young people are able to marvel at the greatness and beauty of God, who does not reveal himself to the wise, but to the poor and the very young (cf. Lk 10:21); they also have a profound sense of filial prayer and trust in the Lord. Adults greatly benefit from closeness to these young ones. I invite Christian communities to provide a proper proper place for those who are the weakest and frailest.

5. In a society that tends to stress profitability, it is good to remember that the human development and maturation of the young cannot come about solely through the acquisition of scientific and technical knowledge. This would be to misunderstand their personal need for interiority. Vital energy springs from the interior experience. For the necessary spiritual development of the young, many parents are concerned that their children receive *a religious education* that is not confused with the teaching of religious knowledge provided in many schools. Information about religion is appropriate, because it enables young people to discover the spiritual and moral roots of their culture. However it does not yet constitute the transmission of the faith, which opens them to practising the Christian life. Retaining the possibility of catechesis is not only a question of religious freedom or openness of spirit, but responds to the concern to introduce young people to the splendour of the truth and to make them disciples of the Lord, accepting their responsibilities in the Christian community. A catechetical formation which does not invite children to meet the Lord in personal prayer and the regular practice of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, might very well lead young people to abandon the faith and the demands of the moral life.

In this perspective, it is necessary that the authorities and all who have responsibilities in the world of education take care to schedule and to maintain, during the weeks of the school term, suitable

periods for families who so wish to offer their children a Christian and spiritual formation, without it becoming for the young an undue burden in their timetable, excluding them from extracurricular activities. In this regard, I acknowledge the considerable efforts made by those responsible for catechesis and by parishes to adapt their schedules to young people's needs.

6. More and more people are participating in catechesis. I am pleased that fathers and mothers of families, in conjunction with men and women religious and priests, are ready to give their time to support this important mission of the Church. As for you, you are attentive to *forming them carefully*, at the theological, spiritual and pedagogical levels, so that they can patiently guide the children in their human and spiritual growth, and pass on the Christian message to them. The catechist is more than a teacher: he is a witness to the Church's faith and an example of moral life. He leads young people to discover Christ and helps them find the place to which they aspire in their Christian communities, which must be ready to welcome them and involve them in various Church activities.

I salute the efforts the diocesan catechetical *services* have made to organize teams in which adults can be formed and find useful texts and the necessary information; thanks to this multifaceted collaboration, those in charge of catechesis are thus supplied with indispensable tools for their educational task at the doctrinal and pedagogical levels.

7. *Catholic schools* have a specific role to play in religious education, as the recently modified statutes of Catholic education and the in-depth reflections during the various National Days for the Administrative Boards of Catholic Education recall. In the schools, through academic instruction, courses in religious culture, catechesis and daily life, it is the task of the educational community to reveal the Christian meaning of man and to take clearly into consideration the essential spiritual and moral values of the Christian message. Administrators and teachers will take care to be examples of Christian living by their whole lifestyle; this is indeed demanding, but young people will discover a living faith and act accordingly as much from the way of life of those around them as from what they say.

8. Please convey my warm encouragement to all the men and women who in the various parts of catechetical formation dedicate themselves generously so that Christ may be known and loved, and that the Christian mystery may be clearly presented to today's young people. Sustained by personal prayer, by the sacramental life and by all the members of the Christian communities, may they continually develop new educational programmes, despite their sometimes limited means. I also invite the ecclesial communities to offer Liturgies of the Word, and on Sundays, whenever possible, Eucharistic celebrations in which children and young people truly participate and which are at their level.

9. In the area of extracurricular activities, the Church has a long tradition and has always had a role to play, because leisure moments are also a valuable time for education. In many youth

movements there remains a vivid and devoted memory of priests, consecrated persons and lay people who, on days off and during the school holidays, brought children together and organized games, learning activities and a community life among young people and adults. These are beneficial elements for the integral growth and socialization of young people. Many young people who took part in these activities have later had considerable responsibilities in the Church or in society. Even today, it is necessary to seek the most appropriate ways to answer the needs of young people, who outside of school, in which *the pace and schedules* are often heavy, legitimately desire some *leisure time*. This is because true education cannot be viewed only as intellectual formation. By attention to soul and body, it is a question of building up in each young person the man or woman he or she will be in the future, a person responsible for himself and his brothers and sisters, by helping him to become spiritually, humanly and emotionally balanced.

10. You are worried by the low number of *young people* in the ecclesial communities. And you have told me of the considerable number of young people who are failures in school or who are disturbed by personal and family difficulties. You also observe that many of them are deeply wounded by the crises affecting contemporary society. Others are fascinated and led astray by movements of all kinds which promise illusory happiness, while restricting their personal freedom and sometimes jeopardizing their psychological balance. In order to fulfil your mission in the most appropriate way, you sponsored a great survey of young people last year; you received more than 1,200 replies, including many important testimonies. This is an encouraging sign and a call to develop more and more challenging programmes for youth.

Thanks to the analyses and the summary which your Episcopal Conference has made on the basis of this survey, you will now help the local communities to develop new pastoral perspectives for responding to the expectations of young people and making them partners in ecclesial life. All the living forces of the Dioceses are called to work together and to intensify their activity with youth: the diocesan organizations concerned, the parishes, the youth movements, such as Catholic Action, the scouts, the MEJ and the charismatic communities.

11. You also see in young people a new thirst to know God, to develop their interior life and to lead a community life, to respond courageously to God's call and to make sound choices in their life. In their way, like the disciples, they want to say to Christ: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:68). During their years of formation, *the chaplaincies in public or private education* are incomparable communities of faith which enable young people to experience the Church and which must help them become more easily involved in the diocesan Church. More and more young people are also taking part in the great gatherings which include liturgical celebrations with a festive spirit. And it is paradoxically these *great Christian gatherings* where silence is also possible, which offer them the possibility of becoming aware that God is close to them, particularly in the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, and that he speaks to their hearts in the Scriptures; they also give them an experience of the universality and diversity in the Church. Thus many young people of your Dioceses are involved in the preparation of World Youth Days. This is

an obvious sign that they aspire to a more active Christian life with other young people of their own age, and that they hope to follow Christ more closely in the Church, to be “prophets of life and love”, as I recently recalled (*Message for World Youth Day*, n. 8; *L’Osservatore Romano* English edition, 6 December 1995, p. 3). In this regard, many of you have told me of your joy in seeing numerous young people make a step of authentic faith to receive the sacrament of Confirmation. All this shows that it is appropriate to encourage the involvement of young people in the Christian community, as you hoped in the message you addressed to France’s young Catholics in 1996.

12. Young people first expect to be listened to, loved and guided, so that they can calmly develop their personality. They also need adults who can remind them of the reference points and demands involved in any life of happiness; who are also capable of finding positive ways to present the Christian message to them, particularly in the moral domain. From this standpoint, as you emphasize, *young priests* are often the best able to be close to young people and to give new vitality to the pastoral care of youth. It would also be good if, possibly released from other ministerial duties, they could be more available for the mission with young people, while continuing to be supported by their brothers in the priesthood and having their place in the parish community. Thus I encourage young priests and young religious to be close to young people, particularly in the key periods of their growth. Among them they will be skilled witnesses and will show them that each one is valuable in the eyes of God and of the Church.

Young teachers have an important role; they will recall that “modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers” (Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 41). By their example and their fidelity to their promises, they will show the way to happiness and will be recognized as the true spiritual guides people need. They will also be concerned to suggest personal guidance to young people and participation in group life; these two complementary aspects of pastoral life will offer the young the necessary elements for giving unity to their life, helping them clearly to discern their vocation.

13. The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council ended with a message to youth, a call for them to be able “to take the torch from the hands of their elders, and the best of the examples and teaching of their parents and teachers” (*Messages of the Council*, 8 December 1965). The Church looks to young people with trust and love. She is glad of their enthusiasm and their desire to give themselves unreservedly. To help them find meaning in their lives, she must present to them “Christ, eternally young”, “the true hero, humble and wise, the prophet of truth and love, the companion and the friend of young people” (*ibid.*).

May parents and teachers never despair and know, in season and out of season, *how to account for the faith, hope and happiness* which gives them life and guides them in their decisions, even if, apparently, young people do not immediately give their consent. How can young people acquire a taste for God and want to be the Lord’s disciples if they never hear him mentioned, if they do not mingle with people who are happy to be Christians and to commit themselves to the way of justice,

solidarity and charity? Seeing adults believing and living their faith, they will discover that it is only love that motivates the members of the Church (cf. St Therese of Lisieux, *Manuscript B*, f. 3).

14. At the end of your *ad limina* visit, I encourage you, together with all the living forces of your Dioceses, to continue your efforts in the pastoral care of youth, which is one of your priorities. May Christian communities have increasing confidence in young people, give them responsibilities and support them patiently. Please convey the Pope's greetings to the priests, deacons, and consecrated persons as well as the lay people in your Dioceses, and in a special way express my affection to the children and young people. I wholeheartedly grant my Apostolic Blessing to you, to the Bishops emeritus and to all the members of your Dioceses.

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