



# The Holy See

---

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BELGIAM BISHOPS' CONFERENCE**

*Friday, 7 November 1997*

*Your Eminence,*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. It is a great joy for me to welcome to the house of Peter's Successor you who are responsible for leading the People of God in Belgium. Your presence reminds me of my journey to your country in June 1995 for the beatification of one of your compatriots, Fr Damien de Veuster, a striking spiritual figure and exemplary witness of love for the sick. I thank Cardinal Godfried Danneels, President of your Bishops' Conference, for his warm words and I would like to offer him my cordial wishes on his name day. You have come to Rome to visit the tombs of the Apostles, so that you may find light and support for your episcopal mission of "building up the Body of Christ" (Eph 4:12) in communion with the universal Church, and may regain your courage for guiding, reinforcing and strengthening the hope of your co-workers, the priests and deacons, as well as that of all the People of God.

2. In your quinquennial reports you have shared with me the various initiatives your Dioceses are taking in view of the Great Jubilee, a new Advent for the Church. I am delighted with the welcome they have received from your diocesans and the vitality they have fostered in your Christian communities. It is a tangible sign of the faithful's spiritual desire, of their thirst for discovering anew the mystery of the Trinity so as to live by it and witness to it in their daily lives.

On the eve of the second year of preparation for the Great Jubilee, I ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten and sustain you in your ministry. As Pastors, you must strengthen your priests in their mission by being close to them, encouraging them and supporting them, so that they will continue to proclaim the Gospel in the tasks assigned to them and will never tire of exemplifying a life of

authentic prayer and one in conformity with their commitment. While respecting individuals and using the necessary discretion, it is also your responsibility to correct by insistent warnings and to rectify erroneous moral situations, so that no one will be a source of scandal for his brothers and sisters and nobody will be lost, as I have already stressed in a letter of 11 June 1993 to the American Episcopate, faced with social problems similar to your own (cf. *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 30 June 1993, p. 2; 1 Cor 10:32; 2 Cor 6:3; *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1044, §2; 1395).

3. I salute the important efforts made in your Dioceses to intensify the catechesis of children and young people, which you consider one of your pastoral priorities. The step taken by many young people during the recent *World Youth Day* can offer you an opportunity to intensify this pastoral activity, particularly through a deeper spiritual and religious formation. The latter is actually one of the essential areas and a keystone of the Church's evangelizing mission, as the recent *General Directory for Catechesis* prepared by the *Congregation for the Clergy* stresses. This document is a valuable tool and guide that opportunely recalls that Christ and his message are the centre of all teaching of the faith. The ministry of catechesis should thus have a choice place in the mission of every Christian community. Under the Bishop's leadership, it calls for the participation of parents, priests, consecrated persons and the faithful, who, in agreeing to become catechists, will receive the proper formation.

Furthermore, I appreciate the attention you are paying to the theological and moral formation of the laity through publications and various courses organized in your Dioceses. You combine this formation with an introduction to prayer and the liturgy, so that the discovery of Christ will not only be a question of knowledge, but will also involve the will and emotions to the point of transforming daily life. In your recent statement *Au souffle de l'Ésprit vers l'An 2000*, you have fittingly reminded the faithful that hope is a gift of the Spirit based on fidelity to God, for which we must continually ask. It is through the sacramental life and participation in the ecclesial community that Christians receive its many fruits. A deeper understanding of the Christian mystery and an authentic spiritual life enables them to find the enthusiasm for actively co-operating in the Church's mission of evangelization and specifically in the development of civil society. In the light of the Gospel and the Church's social doctrine, lay people are called to work for the common good through involvement in the temporal order with all their compatriots, by promoting the fundamental principles regarding the purpose of creation and the way to live in the world, as well as moral values (cf. Vatican II, *Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 7).

I particularly encourage you to develop the pastoral care of young people, making a point of assigning priests who can guide them with the sensitivity required for those whose personality is still being formed. It is important that young people can discover Christ and calmly face the problems associated with modern society. I am delighted with the renewed commitment of catechists, parents, religion professors and other teachers, who are responsible for religious education in schools and parishes; congratulations are also in order for the vitality shown by the

different movements which offer young people activities for discovering and living Christian values and a spiritual life.

4. You have told me of your fears about the increasing shortage of priests and the heavy workload they must currently bear, sometimes to the limits of their strength and until a very advanced age. Knowing the burdensome conditions in which they live, I salute their dedication, perseverance and fidelity, as I invite them to remain hopeful and to find in personal and liturgical prayer, particularly in the celebration of the Eucharist, the strength to live in conformity with Christ, whose living icon they are, in order to be servants of the Gospel and to show people that a life given to God in celibacy is a source of deep joy and inner stability. As you have already done, you must be concerned about the quality of their material life, seeing that they take care to maintain a proper balance between their spiritual life, pastoral life, leisure activities and friendships.

On the other hand, it is important to encourage everything that can strengthen the unity and fraternal sense of the "presbyterate, which is in harmony with the Bishop like the strings of a lyre" (St Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians*). Priests are united with their confrères "by the bond of charity, prayer and total co-operation" (Vatican II, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 8). Therefore, their relations should be marked by friendship and concern for one another, with the younger ones asking to be supported at the start of their ministry and in their first responsibilities and the older ones being able to contribute all their experience. All this is fostered by periods of retreat and theological formation offered to the entire clergy, so that their teaching may be strengthened and be capable of responding more precisely to the questions of our contemporaries. Convey to the priests and deacons my warm encouragement and the assurance of my prayer, particularly to those who are ill or are experiencing difficulties in their ministry. Extend my best wishes to the members of institutes of consecrated life who, despite the lack of vocations, carry on their missions at the cost of severe effort, out of love for Christ and the Church. I hope that they will find possible ways to regroup their strength and to impart their spirituality to the lay people working with them, as they are already doing.

5. You have decided to maintain a major seminary in each Diocese; it is a central and essential institution, which shares in the Church's visibility and apostolic dynamism. You have made a courageous choice, which shows your remarkable concern for the formation of future priests and your care about good discernment. Because of this closeness, young people strengthen their trustful relationship and filial obedience with their Bishop and become aware of the diocesan realities which they will later have to face. With regard to formation, one should first of all verify whether candidates for the priesthood have the right intention and are sufficiently mature, as well as help them to develop their personality (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 62). In this regard, it would be harmful for young people to choose for themselves their place of formation on the basis of criteria connected with their subjectivity, their sensitivity and their history. This can limit their discernment and weaken the aspect of service that the priestly ministry requires. I appreciate the attention you give to philosophical and theological instruction, as well as to the spiritual progress of

your future priests, by choosing professors and directors specially trained for this delicate ministry.

The presence of a seminary is also an opportunity for all the faithful to be close to their future pastors and to support them with their fraternal prayer. All Christians, including parents, should encourage vocations in their families and support young people who feel called to follow Christ in the priestly or religious life. In this spirit, I am delighted with the new vigour you have wished to give the different *Vocation Services*.

6. The current situation has led you to reorganize and restructure your parishes, taking into account the possibilities available to you and the pastoral needs. The parish is not a mere association. It is a sign of the Church's visibility and a home where communion among all the members of the community is expressed. It is the basic unit which ought to provide the chief services of the Church's mission, but which for that reason must have a certain supply of vital forces. Thus it is important that these reorganizations take into account the number of faithful, the possibility of providing the various indispensable pastoral services and the human fabric that finds some of its vitality in the Sunday gatherings and parish activities.

7. In your reports you express your worries and those of a significant number of Belgians about changes in society. You underscore the growing phenomenon of poverty, which is associated with the economic situation and increased unemployment, and is causing a rise in delinquency in all its forms and the temptation to despair over the future. You also note the erosion of moral values which are the basis of an upright personal life, of relations between your fellow citizens, of the necessary solidarity within the national community and of the conduct of the *res publica*. The Church must be concerned about all people, particularly those who are marginalized. So I urge Christians to put themselves more and more at the service of their brothers and sisters and to be attentive to the need that just assistance be given to every individual through involvement in all areas of life in society, with a heightened sense of the integrity that should characterize every person called to take part in the administration of the common good. Certainly, action of this sort will further strengthen the confidence of your compatriots in national institutions.

The Church also must never tire of calling to mind that every person is to be protected, particularly children who, because they are weak and defenceless, are often the target of perverted adults who seriously harm young people in a lasting way, in order to give free rein to their passions. At the moment I am thinking especially of the families who have recently been suffering from criminal behaviour that has victimized their children. Assure them that the Pope joins them in prayer and has been aware of the great courage they have shown in their pain, as he invites all their compatriots to a profound moral revival and to forgiveness.

8. The future of society poses a great ethical challenge to all our contemporaries; for this reason a renewed moral reflection is necessary, which can give everyone the principles for discerning and judging the moral goodness of an action and for adopting correct attitudes. In this regard I

appreciate the strong and courageous statements made by the Bishops, who have called the attention of the faithful and of all the Belgian people to the necessity of respecting the intrinsic dignity of the human being from his conception to his natural death. In every country the Church has the duty to make the voice of the weakest heard and to teach, in season and out of season, the moral values that no law can scorn with impunity. Moreover, even if the Church can in no way be identified with the political community, which she respects, she must remind those who carry out a legitimate public service and all our contemporaries what is the basis of personal and community behaviour and, conversely, what gravely harms the individual and humanity. In fact, "the exercise of authority is meant to give outward expression to a just hierarchy of values in order to facilitate the exercise of freedom and responsibility by all" and with a view to the common good (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2236).

9. At the end of our meeting, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I ask you to convey my affectionate greeting to the priests, deacons, religious and laity of your communities. Assure them of my prayer that, amid their current difficulties, they will not lose hope and that the Spirit will inspire in everyone courageous and prophetic actions that will be a brilliant sign for their brothers and sisters of the salvation offered by Christ and of the conversion that he accomplishes in hearts. As I entrust you to the intercession of your country's saints, I willingly impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to the members of God's People entrusted to your pastoral care.

© Copyright 1997 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

---

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana