



The Holy See

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

Thursday, 4 September 1997

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. With great joy I welcome you during your *ad limina* visit to the seat of Peter's Successor. First of all, I thank your President, Bishop Henri Salina, who has presented to me several aspects of Church life in your Swiss Dioceses as well as several issues which you must face as their Shepherds. I pray that the Lord will accompany you and that our discussions and your meetings with my collaborators in the Roman Curia and with each other will give you an opportunity to deepen and reinforce the *affectus collegialis*; may these meetings also help you to continue your apostolic service in trusting co-operation within your Bishops' Conference.

Today the Bishop's task is particularly difficult. The Bishop must exercise his office and authority as a service to unity and to communion; he must do so with concern for preserving the faith in its entirety, as it has been handed down to us by the Apostles, as well as the Church's teaching, as it has been defined in the course of history. This includes fundamental aspects which cannot be called into question either by public opinion or by the positions taken by certain special-interest groups. The faithful must be helped to embrace the centuries-old continuity of the Church and thereby to take into account the positive aspects of the modern age, but without letting themselves be influenced by contemporary fashions. A local community must be concerned about catholicity, i.e., to live its faith within the Church and in communion with her. The local Church is an integral part of the universal Church, so she must be one with the whole Body.

It is your task to lead the People of God with tireless and patient teaching (cf. 2 Tm 4:2), listening to the faithful and especially to priests, for whom you should have a "particular affection", as the Second Vatican Council stated, for they "assume a part of [the Bishop's] duties and concerns, and

are ceaselessly devoted to their work" (*Christus Dominus*, n. 16). Priests often have to cope with a heavy work-load; indeed, their service is more an *onus* than an *honor*. St John Chrysostom wrote: "He must find a home for all of us in the Church as in a common house; we must be united in mutual affection, as if we all formed one body" (*Sermons on the Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 18, 4). Your quinquennial reports show your concern to be close to your priests, who are your "sons and friends" (*Christus Dominus*, n. 16; cf. Jn 15:15). Continue to look after their spiritual needs as well. Diocesan priests have a special place in your hearts, because being in-cardinated in the local Church, "they are dedicated ... to the care of a particular section of the Lord's flock, and accordingly form one priestly body and one family of which the Bishop is the father" (*ibid.*, n. 28).

You should also be concerned to promote harmonious co-operation in all the varied works of the Church. This co-operation among all the Church's members, if well ordered, can help her to strengthen her particular dynamism. Swiss communities however must also take into account the life of other communities. They must be ready to accept, in a spirit of faith, the norms established by the Successor of Peter, Shepherd of the universal Church. The life of local communities must conform to the Church's own structures, which are different from those of civil institutions.

2. Lay people, some of whom are very active in pastoral life, fulfil their mission in conjunction with the Church's pastors, the Bishops, priests and deacons, who, as ordained ministers, have the task of teaching, sanctifying and leading the People of God in the name of Christ the Head (*CIC, can. 1008-1009*). Within the context of the Church's one mission, the respective tasks both differ from and complement each other. It is particularly important that they work together on an active youth apostolate, in which they encourage the development of movements and associations that can greatly help the Church to achieve a new dynamism. So I am pleased that men and women are actively fulfilling important tasks in catechesis and the guiding of youth groups. They have responsibility for imparting Christian values and the Catholic faith to young people. They should co-operate with parents, since they are the first witnesses to their children. I urge those who are responsible for marriage counseling and for assistance to couples and families to be faithful to what the Church teaches.

It would be good to reflect on what the Second Vatican Council stressed in the fourth chapter of the Constitution *Lumen gentium* (nn. 30-38) about the particular tasks of lay people in the Church. Their union with Christ in the body of the Church obliges them to orient their own activities towards the proclamation of the Gospel and the growth of the People of God. This particularly occurs when they fulfil their role of imbuing the realities of the temporal world with a Christian spirit (cf. *ibid.*, n. 31; *Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 7). One of the tasks belonging to pastors in this regard is that of offering lay people a serious formation for their activities.

3. I invite the faithful to accept the Church's teaching in faith. Being a Christian requires continual interior conversion. Obedience to the Church is indispensable for accepting the Revelation

entrusted to the Church, for having communion in the truth which makes us free (cf. Jn 8:32) and in the Holy Spirit who has poured God's love into our hearts (cf. Rom 5:5). This obedience to the Church also means accepting the order established on the basis of the norms in force for the various levels of their activity. Particularly in the liturgical field, such fidelity is more necessary than ever; in this regard what the Second Vatican Council said should be recalled: "Regulation of the sacred liturgy depends solely on the authority of the Church, that is, on the Apostolic See and, as laws may determine, on the Bishop.... Therefore no other person, not even a priest, may add, remove or change anything in the liturgy on his own authority" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 22).

In view of what has been said, I am delighted to see that every day more believers are making the effort to have a better understanding of Catholic doctrine. I would like to underscore the special mission of theologians, whose task is to explain the depths of the divine mysteries to their brothers and sisters. This occurs when their teaching is based on Revelation and is sustained by prayer and an intense spiritual life. Theological teaching is a service to the truth and to communion. It cannot remain a simply private reflection. Therefore the Church herself is the natural context for theological research. Sacred science cannot be separated from the Word of God, which is living and illuminating. It is received and passed on by the Church, whose Magisterium is exercised in the name of Christ (cf. Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, n. 10; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, 24 May 1990).

4. As you clearly emphasize in your quinquennial reports, you are worried about *the problem of vocations*. It is a concern for Christian communities as a whole. There vocations can blossom when supported by everyone's prayer and fostered by youth ministry in its entirety. It is particularly up to parents and teachers to be the instruments of the Lord's call. In recent years, in some of your Dioceses few young people have been willing to commit themselves to the way of the priesthood or the consecrated life. Rightly, therefore, you have given yourselves the task of putting new efforts into the pastoral care of vocations in Christian communities and families, emphasizing the beauty and greatness of the gift of self in celibacy freely chosen for love of the Lord, but without minimizing the value of the lay state and matrimony. As I recalled in the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, making my own the request of the Synod Fathers, it is necessary "to instruct and educate the lay faithful regarding the evangelical, spiritual and pastoral reasons proper to priestly celibacy, so that they will help priests with their friendship, understanding and co-operation" (n. 50). This is all the more important because, in a society where the Christian life and celibacy often seem to be regarded as obstacles to personal fulfilment, some families can be anxious about seeing their sons or daughters leaving everything to follow Christ.

The question concerns education as a whole; in general, it is desirable that parents, in the light of the Church's faith, guide young people with trust and courage so that they will fully assume their role in the Christian community, actively participate in parish life and become involved in

associations and movements. Thus an authentic process of personal, social and spiritual growth will lead young people, who have been called by the Lord, freely to fulfil their vocation; this is the only way they will be happy in their lives. In order that they may willingly give a positive answer to Christ's call, it is essential for Christian communities to recognize the role and specific mission of priests and the consecrated life. In fact, how could young people perceive the greatness of these vocations, if doubts remain about the specific role of those who have received the mandate for them from the Church?

5. Today Bishops must be particularly attentive to the *formation of seminarians*. Continue to attach great importance to the quality of spiritual formation and the programmes for intellectual formation. Every aspect of formation should be balanced to contribute to the maturity of your future co-workers. In this context, it is good to keep in mind the demands of the contemporary world in order to prepare them to carry out a ministry well-adapted to our times; but you must see that formation is focused on the essential content of the faith, so that young priests can suitably address the issues that are constantly raised and debated in public opinion. The sound rules given in the *Ratio institutionis sacerdotalis* will be particularly useful to you.

6. Here I would like to ask you to convey the Successor of Peter's trustful greeting to the priests of your Dioceses. By living their priesthood in an exemplary way, they are the first witnesses of the vocation to the ministry. By seeing their life, young people can experience a desire to imitate their priestly commitment. May the presbyterate be a spiritual crown around the Bishop! I am aware of the increasingly heavy load borne by priests in your country, particularly by those involved in parish ministry. Express to them the Pope's warm encouragement and that he asks them never to be discouraged but to remain pastors who are zealous for the people entrusted to them. Their mission must be rooted in an intense spiritual and sacramental life, which integrates their personality and makes them ready to receive the graces needed for their Gospel service. In fact, it is the Lord who with his Spirit helps and accompanies those he calls to follow him in the priesthood. Priests must dedicate themselves to being joyful witnesses to Christ by an upright life in harmony with the commitment they made on the day of their ordination.

In Switzerland religious life has had a remarkable tradition in its history. I entrust you with the task of telling religious that today the Church is still counting particularly on them to continue their involvement in the essential areas of pastoral life: education, health care, assistance to the poor and aged, and most especially, the rest and renewal they offer many of the faithful in their guest-houses and retreat centres, or on the pilgrimages they lead. I salute their courage and discreet availability. At a time when the number of vocations is decreasing, it is important for the whole Church to have a greater appreciation of the value and meaning of consecrated life.

7. The Swiss Dioceses have a deep-rooted *missionary tradition*. I thank them for the attention and generous aid they have given the young Churches for their own mission and for their contribution to development. You give appreciable expression to your concern for the life of the universal

Church; this also shows your acute sense of justice and solidarity with the destitute. In concrete ways, Swiss Catholics are thus in communion with the whole Church, for whose care the Bishops have primary responsibility, as the Second Vatican Council clearly stressed: "Bishops, as legitimate successors of the Apostles and members of the episcopal college, should appreciate that they are closely united to each other and should be solicitous for all the Churches (*Christus Dominus*, n. 6).

8. In short, I would also like to mention the importance of *the ecumenical movement* in your country. Together with your diocesans, continue the shared prayer and dialogue with all of our Christian brethren, while taking into account, without equivocation, the unresolved doctrinal and pastoral questions as well as different sensibilities. There may still be a long way to go. It is by faithfully applying the principles and norms contained in the Directory for ecumenism that true progress will be made on the path to full unity (*Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 25 March 1993*).

9. You have fittingly presented to the Christian people the figure of St Peter Canisius, who died 400 years ago in Fribourg. His teaching, his educational sense and his apostolic commitment to serving the Gospel are aspects of his life that can today inspire the activity of pastors and Christian communities. He is also a model for ecumenical dialogue: respectful towards others, filled with a heartfelt charity and concerned to bear witness to his faith in Christ and to his love for the Church united around the Bishops and Peter's Successor. The recent beatifications have also had a positive effect on the spiritual and apostolic life of the Christian people: a nation's saints are close to their compatriots. They are privileged witnesses and models of Christian life.

As I entrust you to the intercession of your country's saints, to whom the faithful remain deeply attached, I cordially impart my Blessing to you and to the priests, religious and lay people of your Dioceses.

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