



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO SPANISH BISHOPS ON THEIR
"AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" VISIT**

Tuesday, 30 September 1997

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. I am pleased to receive you today, Pastors of God's Church in Spain, from the metropolitan sees of Santiago, Burgos, Zaragoza and Pamplona, and the suffragan Dioceses. These are Churches of an ancient, rich spiritual and missionary tradition, sanctified by the blood of many martyrs and enriched by the solid virtues of many Christian families which have produced abundant priestly and religious vocations. You have come to Rome to make your *ad limina* visit, a venerable institution that helps keep alive the close bonds of communion that unite each Bishop with Peter's Successor. Your presence here also enables me to feel close to the priests, religious and faithful of the particular Churches over which you preside and some of which I have had the opportunity to visit during my pastoral Journeys to your country.

I thank Archbishop Elías Yanes Alvarez of Zaragoza, President of the Spanish Episcopal Conference, for the kind words he has addressed to me on behalf of you all, expressing your affection and esteem, and at the same time informing me of your pastoral worries and projects. I respond to all this by praying to the Lord that faith, hope and love and the courageous witness of all Christians will always flourish in your Dioceses and throughout Spain, in conformity with the heritage passed down from the time of the Apostles.

2. Encouraged by the Lord's promises and the strength his Spirit gives us, as Successors of the Apostles you are called to be the first to undertake the mission he has entrusted to his Church, even if you have to face and be willing to bear the weight of the cross, which in a society like ours today can take a variety of forms.

Both individually and collegially through the Episcopal Conference or other ecclesial institutions, you share in the analysis of the expectations and achievements of Spanish society today, attempting to interpret them in the light of the Gospel and to orient society itself in the faith. Consequently, as you face the social and cultural transformation that is taking place, as you face the paradox of a world that is aware of the urgent need for solidarity but at the same time experiences political, social, economic and racial pressures and divisions (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 4), you seek to promote in your pastoral ministry a new social order, based increasingly on ethical values and inspired by the Christian message.

Listening to what "the Spirit says to the Churches" (Rv 2:7), you are also aware of the duty to make a calm, open and comprehensive discernment of the various circumstances and events, initiatives and projects, without neglecting the serious problems and deepest aspirations of society as a whole.

Your pastoral ministry is addressed to the people of our time, the faithful who actively participate in the life of the diocesan community as well as those who say they are non-practising or indifferent, and those who, although calling themselves Catholics, are not consistent in their moral behaviour. For this reason, I encourage you to persevere, tirelessly and without discouragement, in your task of teaching and proclaiming Christ's Gospel to men (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 11). In presenting Christian teaching to enlighten the conscience of the faithful, the Bishop must do so using suitable language and methods (cf. *ibid.*, n. 13), as the Lord did with the disciples at Emmaus, so that the Scriptures may be understood and thus the Magisterium will not remain sterile or a voice that is not heard by contemporary society, which is so visibly marked by secularism. This is why you must not despair nor cease to devise and implement appropriate pastoral programmes. Although your responsibilities are very great, bear in mind that the Lord's Spirit gives you the strength you need.

As leaders of the particular Churches, be fathers and shepherds for each one of the faithful, seeking to be especially close to the neediest and the marginalized. The pastoral visit, prescribed by ecclesiastical discipline (cf. *can. 396-398, CIC*) will help you to be present, close to and merciful among your faithful, in order to proclaim constantly and everywhere the truth which sets them free (Jn 8:32) and to foster the growth of the Christian life. This closeness to everyone must be expressed in a visible and concrete way by making yourselves accessible to those who turn to you with trust and love because they feel the need for guidance, help and advice, and by following St Paul's counsel to Titus that a Bishop must be "hospitable, a lover of goodness, master of himself, upright, holy and self-controlled" (Ti 1:8).

3. Priests and deacons respectively are close co-workers in your mission to proclaim the Word throughout your Diocese, to celebrate the divine liturgy in its churches and chapels, to manifest the union of all the members of God's People and to foster active, attentive charity. They take part in your most important mission and, in the celebration of all the sacraments, they are hierarchically

united to you in various ways. Thus, in a certain sense they make you present in every one of the communities of the faithful (cf. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 5).

The Second Vatican Council, following the Church's tradition, studied in particular depth the relationship of Bishops with their presbyterate. You must devote your greatest efforts and energy to your priests. I therefore encourage you to be always close to each of them, to maintain a relationship of true priestly friendship with them, in the manner of the Good Shepherd. Help them to be men of regular prayer, to experience the silence of contemplation despite the noise and distraction of many activities, the devout, daily celebration of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours, which the Church has entrusted to them for the good of all Christ's Body. The priest's prayer life is a requirement of his pastoral ministry, if Christian communities are to be enriched with the witness of the prayerful priest who proclaims the mystery of God by his words and by his life.

Be concerned with the particular situation of each priest, to help them continue with joyful hope on the path of priestly holiness. Offer them suitable assistance in the difficult situations they might encounter. May none of them lack what he needs to live worthily his sublime vocation and ministry!

As I had the opportunity to recall in the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, continuing formation for the clergy is of the utmost importance. I am pleased to observe that my call for this has been accepted, and in the different Dioceses activities are being planned so that the priest can respond with the pastoral training required by the circumstances and the present moment. This formation "is an intrinsic requirement of the gift and sacramental ministry received" (n. 70), since with ordination, "begins that response which, as a fundamental choice, must be expressed anew and reaffirmed through the years of [the] priesthood in countless other responses, all of them rooted in and enlivened by that 'yes' of Holy Orders" (*ibid.*). The Apostle Peter's exhortation: "Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election" (2 Pt 1:10), is a pressing invitation not to neglect this aspect.

In this regard, the document *Sacerdotes día a día*, ("Priests day by day"), prepared by your Episcopal Commission for the Clergy and dedicated to integral continuing formation, will certainly help to strengthen this formation in your country, since it is a question of an activity that the priest must take up to be consistent with himself, and it is rooted in the pastoral charity that must be present throughout his life. It is the responsibility of every priest, his Bishop and the ecclesial community he serves, to provide the necessary means for him to devote some of his time to formation in the various fields throughout his life, without allowing this important duty to be hindered by the various and numerous activities that pastoral life involves, or by the commitments that characterizes the priestly mission.

4. On the other hand, the seminary, where future priests are formed, must be the focus of

privileged attention on the part of the Bishop. The vocational crisis, which in recent years has caused a noticeable decrease in the number of seminarians, seems to be passing, and statistics are hopeful in this respect. We give thanks to God for this, but we must continue insistently to implore the Lord of the harvest to send labourers to his Church. In recent times, the above-mentioned crisis has also caused the disappearance of minor seminaries, or, in some Dioceses, their transformation. Highly recommended by the Second Vatican Council, they must be re-established wherever possible (cf. *Optatam totius*, n. 3), since they help the vocational discernment of adolescents and young people, providing them at the same time with an integral and coherent formation based on intimacy with Christ. In this way those who are called are prepared to respond joyfully and generously to the gift of their vocation.

The Bishop is ultimately responsible for the seminary since one day, by the imposition of hands, he will admit to the diocesan priesthood those who have been formed there. When a Diocese is without a seminary, it is important that the Bishop and his co-workers remain in frequent contact with the centre where they send their candidates, just as they should make this institution, which is so vital to the Diocese, known to the faithful and especially to the young.

In the seminary a true family spirit should be encouraged, a prelude to the brotherhood of diocesan priests, so that each student, with his own sensitivity, can mature in his vocation, take on commitments and be formed in a priest's particular community, spiritual and intellectual life under the wise and prudent guidance of a formation team suited to the task. It is essential to introduce seminarians to intimacy with Christ, Model of pastors, through prayer and frequent reception of the sacraments. At the same time and in the context of integral formation, it just as important to teach them to become increasingly responsible for their daily actions and to acquire self-control; these are essential aspects for the practice of the theological and cardinal virtues, which in the future they will have to present to the faithful by their own example.

Although seminary formation must not only be theoretical, since seminarians also carry out pastoral activities in parishes and apostolic movements, which encourage them to be rooted in the diocesan community, the priority at this stage is study, so that they may acquire a sound intellectual, philosophical and theological preparation, essential for missionaries who proclaim the Good News of the Gospel to their brothers and sisters. If this training is not acquired during their seminary years, experience shows that it is very difficult, if not virtually impossible, to make up for it later. On the other hand, it is necessary to plan and provide for appropriate advanced studies for young priests who have an aptitude for it, so that they may devote themselves to research and thus assure continuity in seminary teaching or in other ecclesiastical centres. Some priests should also be trained in vocational discernment and spiritual direction, necessary for rounding out the seminary's formation programme.

5. Many factors, among which the prevailing relativism and the myth of materialistic progress as primary values must be pointed out, as you mentioned in your *Plan de Acción pastoral de la*

Conferencia Episcopal Española para el cuatrienio 1997-2000 (cf. 45), such as the fear of young people to make definitive commitments, have had a negative influence on the number of vocations. With this situation, we must trust in the Lord first of all, and at the same time seriously commit ourselves to creating in every ecclesial community a spiritual and pastoral environment which fosters the manifestation of the Lord's call to the priestly or consecrated life in the diversity of forms which are found in the Church, encouraging young people to offer their lives totally to the service of the Gospel.

The spiritual life and the daily example of priests themselves is very influential, as is the favourable environment of Christian families, which can help make religious vocations abundant in your particular Churches, so spiritually rich and fruitful until a few years ago.

6. For years some of your Dioceses have endured the suffering of terrorist attacks on people's lives and freedom. I follow these tragic events with deep sorrow and with you I would like to express once again the most categorical, unmitigated condemnation of this unjustified and unjustifiable aggression. In this regard, teach the way of forgiveness, of living together in brotherhood, solidarity and justice, which are the true pillars of national peace and prosperity! I encourage you, with your faithful, to collaborate as much as possible in totally and radically eliminating this violence, and, in God's name, I ask those who perpetuate it to renounce it as a pretext for political action and vindication.

7. "The Compostela Jubilee Year: Gateway to the Holy Year 2000". With this motto the Church in Spain invites people to take part in that ecclesial event, deeply rooted in history, which will take place in the year 1999 and must be an effective preparation for the Great Jubilee of the third Christian millennium. The aim of the Compostela Year is primarily religious and is expressed in the pilgrimage which takes the so-called "Santiago Way". The spiritual fruits of the St James' Years, in which so many pilgrims have come to Compostela from Spain, Europe and other parts of the world to receive the "perdonanza" are well known. I therefore encourage you to prepare this event well, so that it is a true "Year of Grace" in which Christian faith and witness is fostered through continuous conversion and the assiduous preaching of God's Word; may prayer and charity promote the holiness of the faithful, and may hope in the good thing to come enliven the continual evangelization of society, which can be the great spiritual and apostolic fruit of this jubilee year in harmony with the rich tradition of the past.

8. Dear Brothers, once again I assure you of my deep communion in prayer and my firm hope in the future of your Dioceses, which, despite their trials, show great vitality. May the Lord Jesus Christ grant you the joy of serving him by leading in his name the particular Churches he has entrusted to you. May the Virgin most holy and the patron saints of each locality accompany and protect you always.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to the faithful

of your Dioceses.

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