



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE CHURCH
IN THE STATES OF MINNESOTA, NORTH DAKOTA
AND SOUTH DAKOTA (U.S.A.) ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

6 June 1998

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. With great joy in the Lord I welcome you, the Pastors of the Church in the States of Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota, on your *ad Limina* visit. The theme of my reflections with the Bishops of your country this year is the duty, in view of the approaching new millennium, of renewed evangelization, for which the Second Vatican Council marvellously prepared the way. Today I wish to reflect on the laity in the Church's life and mission. The new evangelization that can make the twenty-first century a springtime of the Gospel is a task for the entire People of God, but will depend in a decisive way on the lay faithful being fully aware of their baptismal vocation and their responsibility for bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to their culture and society.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council gave special attention to the dignity and mission of the lay faithful, urging them "in the Lord's name to give a glad, generous and prompt response to the impulse of the Holy Spirit and to the voice of Christ, who is giving them an especially urgent invitation at this moment" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 33). In order to restore the needed balance to ecclesial life, the Council dedicated an extremely rich chapter in *Lumen Gentium* to the role of the laity in the Church's saving mission, and it further developed this theme in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*). With specific reference to contemporary circumstances, that mission was specified still more concretely in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*). In these documents and others the Council sought to extend the great flourishing of the lay apostolate which had characterized previous decades. More and more lay people had taken to heart the stirring words of Pope Pius XII: "Lay

believers are in the front line of Church life; for them the Church is the animating principle of human society. Therefore, they in particular ought to have an ever clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church" (*Discourse*, February 20, 1946).

2. It was in this context of vigorous lay action that the Council could clearly affirm: "It is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity" (*Lumen Gentium*, 40); and the Council's Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity makes it clear that lay people are called to exercise the apostolate in the Church and in the world (cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 5). Lay men and women have indeed responded to this call. Everywhere there has been a blossoming of various forms of lay participation in the Church's life and mission. Much has also been done since the Council to explore more deeply the theological basis for the vocation and mission of the laity. This development reached a certain maturity in the 1987 Synod of Bishops on the role of the Laity, with the subsequent Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, published on December 30, 1988. The Synod indicated the concrete ways in which the Council's rich teaching on the lay state could be further translated into practice. One of its principal achievements was to set the various ministries and charisms within the framework of an ecclesiology of communion (cf. *Christifideles Laici*, 21). Thus it dealt with the specific role of the laity, not as an extension or derivation of the clerical and hierarchical role, but in relation to the fundamental truth that all the baptized receive the same sanctifying grace, the grace of justification by which each one becomes a "new creature", an adopted child of God, a "partaker of the divine nature", a member of Christ and co-heir with him, a temple of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1265). All the faithful - both ordained ministers and laity - together form the one body of the Lord: "Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all" (Col 3:11).

We are witnessing a return to the authentic theology of the laity found in the New Testament, where the Church, the body of Christ, is the whole of the chosen race, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, God's own people (cf. 1 Pt 2:9), and not a portion of it. Saint Paul reminds us that the growth of the body depends on every member playing its part: "If we live by the truth and in love, we shall grow in all ways into Christ, who is the head, by whom the whole body is fitted and joined together, every joint adding its own strength, for each separate part to work according to its function. So the body grows until it has built itself up, in love" (Eph 4:15-16). In preparing for the great ecclesial event that was the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII was so struck by these words that he declared that they deserved to be inscribed on the Council's doors (cf. *Address on Pentecost Sunday*, June 5, 1960).

In an ecclesiology of communion, the Church's hierarchical structure is not a matter of power but of service, completely ordered to the holiness of Christ's members. The threefold duty to teach, sanctify and govern, entrusted to Peter and the Apostles and their successors, "has no other purpose except to form the Church in line with the ideal of sanctity already programmed and

prefigured in Mary" (*Address to the Roman Curia*, 22 December 1987, No. 3). The Marian dimension of the Church is prior to the Petrine or hierarchical dimension, "as well as being supreme and pre-eminent, richer in personal and communitarian implications for the various ecclesial vocations" (*ibid.*). If I mention these well-known truths, it is because everywhere in the Church, and not least in your country, we see the spread of a fresh and invigorating lay spirituality and the magnificent fruits of the laity's greater involvement in the Church's life. As we approach the Third Christian Millennium it is of paramount importance that the Pope and the Bishops, fully conscious of their own special ministry of service in the Mystical Body of Christ, continue to "stir and promote a deeper awareness among all the faithful of the gift and responsibility they share, both in association and as individuals, in the communion and mission of the Church" (*Christifideles Laici*, 2).

3. The liturgical renewal which the Council ardently desired and fostered has resulted in the more frequent and lively participation of the lay faithful in the tasks proper to them in the liturgical assembly. Full, active and conscious participation in the liturgy should give birth to a more vigorous lay witness in the world, not a confusion of roles in the worshipping community. Based on the will of Christ himself, there is a fundamental distinction between the ordained ministry arising from the Sacrament of Holy Orders, and the functions open to lay people, and founded on the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and, for most, Matrimony. The intention of the Holy See's recent Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests has been to reaffirm and clarify the canonical and disciplinary norms regulating this area, by putting the relevant directives in relation to the theological and ecclesiological principles involved. I urge you to ensure that the liturgical life of your communities is led and governed by the grace of Christ working through the Church, which the Lord intended as a hierarchical communion. The distinction between the priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood must always be respected, since it belongs to "the constitutive form which [Christ] indelibly impressed on his Church" (*Discourse at the Symposium on "The Participation of the Lay Faithful in the Priestly Ministry"*, May 11, 1994, No. 3).

4. As the Fathers at the 1987 Synod on the Laity pointed out, it is an inadequate understanding of the role of the laity which leads lay men and women to become so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that they fail to become actively involved in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural and political field (cf. *Christifideles Laici*, 2). The first requirement of the new evangelization is the actual witness of Christians who live by the Gospel: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Mt 5:16). Since lay people are at the forefront of the Church's mission to evangelize all areas of human activity - including the workplace, the worlds of science and medicine, the world of politics, and the diverse world of culture - they must be strong enough and sufficiently catechized "to testify how the Christian faith constitutes the only valid response ... to the problems and hopes that life poses to every person and society" (*Christifideles Laici*, 34). As my predecessor Pope Paul VI put it: "Take a Christian or a handful of Christians who in the midst of their own community

show their capacity for understanding and acceptance, their sharing of life and destiny with other people, their solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good. Let us suppose that, in addition, they radiate in an altogether simple and unaffected way their faith in values that go beyond current values, and their hope in something that is not seen and that one would not dare to imagine. Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 21). Through God's grace, your particular Churches are all gifted with Catholic men and women eager to live a full Christian life and to work for Christ's kingdom in the world around them. The Bishops must not fail them by a lack of pastoral leadership. In your ministry and governance you have to impress on everyone the importance of formation and adult catechesis, prayer and sacramental practice, a real commitment to the evangelization of culture and the application of Christian moral and social doctrine in public and private life.

5. The immediate and in many ways most important arena of the laity's Christian witness is marriage and the family. Where family life is strong and healthy, the sense of community and solidarity is also strong, and this helps to build that "civilization of life and love" which must be everyone's aim. But where the family is weak, all human relationships are exposed to instability and fragmentation. Today the family is under pressure from many quarters: "The family is placed at the center of the great struggle between good and evil, between life and death, between love and all that is opposed to love. To the family is entrusted the task of striving, first and foremost, to unleash the forces of good, the source of which is found in Christ the Redeemer of man" (cf. *Letter to Families*, 23). At a time when the very definitions of marriage and family are endangered by attempts to enshrine in legislation alternative and distorted notions of these basic human communities, your ministry must include the clear proclamation of the truth of God's original design. Since the Christian family is the "domestic church", couples must be helped to relate their family life in concrete ways to the life and mission of the Church (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 49). The parish should be a "family of families", helping in every way possible to nourish the spiritual life of parents and children through prayer, the word of God, the sacraments, and the witness of holiness and charity. Bishops and priests should be eager to help and encourage families in every way, and should give their support to groups and associations which promote family life. While it is important that the local Church respond to the needs of people in problem situations, pastoral planning should also give adequate attention to the needs of ordinary families seeking to live up to their vocation. These families are the backbone of society and the hope of the Church: the principal promoters of Christian family life are couples and families themselves, who have a special responsibility to be servants of other couples and families.

6. This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the publication by my predecessor Pope Paul VI of the Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae*. The truth about human sexuality, and the Church's teaching on the sanctity of human life and on responsible parenthood, must be presented in the light of the

theological development which has followed that document, and in the light of the experience of couples who have faithfully followed this teaching. Many couples have experienced how natural family planning promotes mutual respect, encourages tenderness between husband and wife, and helps develop an authentic inner freedom (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2370; *Humanae Vitae*, 21). Their experience deserves to be shared, for it is the living confirmation of the truth which *Humanae Vitae* teaches. In contrast, there is a growing awareness of the serious harm caused to marital relationships by recourse to artificial contraception, which, because it inevitably thwarts the total self-giving implied in the conjugal act, at one and the same time destroys its procreative meaning and weakens its unitive significance (cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 13).

With courage and compassion, Bishops, priests and lay Catholics must seize the opportunity to propose to the sons and daughters of the Church, and to the whole of society, the truth about the special gift that is human sexuality. The false promises of the “sexual revolution” are now painfully obvious in the human suffering caused by unprecedented rates of divorce, by the scourge of abortion and its lasting effects on those involved. Yet the teaching of the magisterium, the development of the “theology of the body,” and the experience of faithful Catholic couples have given Catholics in the United States a uniquely powerful and compelling opportunity to bring the truth about human sexuality into a society that sorely needs to hear it.

7. The multi-cultural reality of American society is a source of enrichment for the Church, but it also presents challenges to pastoral action. Many Dioceses, because of past and continuing immigration, have a strong Hispanic presence. The Hispanic faithful bring their own particular gifts to the local Church, not least the vitality of their faith and their deep sense of family values. They also face enormous difficulties, and you are making great efforts to have priests and others appropriately trained to provide good pastoral care and needed services to minority families and communities. In the face of extremely active proselytism by other religious groups, instruction in the faith, the building up of living communities, attention to the needs of families and young people, the fostering of personal and family prayer, a spiritual and liturgical life centered on the Eucharist and genuine Marian devotion are all essential (cf. *Address to Hispanics at Our Lady of Guadalupe Plaza, San Antonio*, September 13, 1987). The Hispanic faithful should be able to feel that their natural place, their spiritual home, is in the heart of the Catholic community.

The same should be said about the members of the African-American community, who also are a vital presence in all your Churches. Their love for the word of God is a special blessing to be treasured. While the United States has made great progress in ridding itself of racial prejudice, continuous efforts are needed to ensure that black Catholics are fully involved in the Church's life.

In your Dioceses, as in other parts of the United States, there are not a few Native Americans, proud descendants of the original peoples of your land. I encourage your efforts to provide for their spiritual care, to support them as they strive to preserve the good and noble traditions of their culture, and to be close to them as they struggle to overcome the negative effects of the

marginalization from which they have suffered for so long. In the one Church of Christ, every culture and race finds its home.

8. Finally, I wish to tell you of the great joy which I experienced last weekend in Saint Peter's Square at the meeting of so many lay members of the various ecclesial movements and communities which represent a providential gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church of our time. These movements and communities share a strong commitment to the spiritual life and to missionary outreach. As instruments of conversion and authentic Gospel witness, they render a magnificent service in helping the Church's members to respond to the universal call to holiness and to their vocation to transform worldly realities in the light of the Gospel values of life, freedom and love. They represent a genuine source of renewal and evangelization, and should therefore have an important place in your discernment and pastoral planning.

An extraordinary and surprising new springtime for the Church will blossom from the dynamic faith, living hope and active charity of the lay men and women who open their hearts to the life-giving presence of the Holy Spirit. As Bishops our task is to teach, sanctify and govern in the name of Christ, seeking always to bring to fruition the gifts and talents of the faithful entrusted to our care. I urge you to encourage everyone to take their proper place in the Church and to become ever more personally responsible for her mission. Devote special attention to strengthening family life, as the essential condition of the well-being of individuals and society. Draw on the spiritual resources of the various cultures present in the Church in the United States, and direct them to the genuine renewal of the whole People of God. Entrusting your episcopal ministry to the intercession of Mary, Help of Christians, I pray for the priests, religious and lay faithful of your Dioceses and I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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