



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE ECCLESIASTICAL PROVINCES  
OF BALTIMORE, WASHINGTON, ATLANTA AND MIAMI  
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

*17 March 1998*

*Dear Cardinal Hickey and Cardinal Keeler,*

*Dear Brother Bishops,* 1. I warmly welcome you, the Pastors of the ecclesiastical provinces of Baltimore, Washington, Atlanta and Miami. Your visit *ad Limina* is a time of grace as you pray at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul who fearlessly proclaimed the Good News of salvation to the point of martyrdom. In entrusting to them your pastoral mission of preaching the "unsearchable riches of Christ" and of making known "the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things" (Eph 3:8-9), may you feel reassured that you are not alone in your task; the Lord provides the strength and the means necessary for you to fulfill his command: "preach the Gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15). In my meetings with the first two groups of Bishops from your country, we have reflected together on the reception in your country of the great grace of the Second Vatican Council. In those reflections I referred to two essential elements of your episcopal ministry in the cultural context of the United States. First, because the message we preach is God's wisdom, not our own, everything in the life of the Church must correspond to "the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us" (2 Tim 1:14). Secondly, the purpose of our ministry is to lead the members of the Church into a living communion with God and with one another. That *communio*, according to the Council, is the very heart of the Church's understanding of herself. In this meeting, I would like to reflect with you on the truth that the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, for the universal community of Christ's followers, present in and living through the particular Churches, is the continuation in time of the eternal mission of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Ad Gentes*, 2). As the whole Church prepares for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, I am confident that you will seek to renew among your communities a vital, dynamic sense of the Church's mission, so that this time of grace may be a new springtime for the Gospel. This is the hope and determination which inspired the recent Special Assembly for America of the Synod of Bishops, which issued a compelling call to conversion, communion and solidarity. This same hope and determination inspires what you have written in your own National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States, *Go and Make Disciples*, which is a significant and valid guide in your efforts "to bring about in all Catholics such an enthusiasm for their faith that, in living their faith in Jesus, they freely share it with others" (*loc. cit.*, I). 2. In that document you rightly insist that "evangelization can only happen when people accept the Gospel freely as the 'good news' it is

meant to be, because of the power of the Gospel message and the accompanying grace of Christ". Evangelization is the Church's effort to proclaim to everyone that God loves them, that he has given himself for them in Christ Jesus, and that he invites them to an unending life of happiness. Once this Gospel has been accepted as the "good news", it demands to be shared. All baptized Christians must commit themselves to evangelization, conscious that God is already at work in the minds and hearts of their listeners, just as he prompted the Ethiopian to ask for baptism when Philip told him "the good news of Jesus" (Acts 8:35). Evangelization is thus a part of the great mystery of God's self-revelation to the world: it involves the human effort to preach the Gospel and the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in those who encounter its saving message. Since we are proclaiming a mystery, we are the servants of a supernatural gift, which surpasses anything our human minds are capable of fully grasping or explaining, yet which attracts by its own inner logic and beauty.<sup>3</sup> The spirit of the new evangelization should inspire every aspect of your teaching, instruction and catechesis. These tasks involve a vital effort to come to a deeper understanding of the mysteries of faith and to find meaningful language with which to convince our contemporaries that they are called to newness of life through God's love. Since love can only be understood by someone who actually loves, the Christian mystery can only be effectively communicated by those who allow themselves to be genuinely possessed by God's love. Thus the passing on of the faith, according to the Church's tradition, needs to be carried out in a spiritual environment of friendship with God, rooted in a love which will one day find its fulfilment in the contemplation of God himself. Everyone has a part to play in this great effort. Your task is to inspire priests, deacons, religious and faithful to have the courage and the conviction to share their faith with others. By proclaiming the Gospel, Christians help others to satisfy the yearning for fullness of life and truth which exists in every human heart.<sup>4</sup> The parish will necessarily be the center of the new evangelization, and thus parish life must be renewed in all its dimensions. During the parish visitations I undertook as Archbishop of Kraków, I always made an effort to stress that the parish is not an accidental collection of Christians who happen to live in the same neighborhood. Rather, because the parish makes present and in a sense incarnates the Mystical Body of Christ, the threefold *munus* ("office") of Christ as prophet, priest, and king must be exercised there. Thus the parish must be a place where, through worship in communion of doctrine and life with the Bishop and with the Universal Church, the members of Christ's body are formed for evangelization and works of Christian love. A parish will be involved in many activities. But none is as vital or as community-forming as the Sunday celebration of the Lord's Day and his Eucharist (cf. [\*Catechism of the Catholic Church\*, No. 2177](#)). Through regular and fervent reception of the sacraments, God's people come to know the fullness of the Christian dignity that is theirs by baptism; they are elevated and transformed. Through careful listening to the word of Scripture and sound instruction in the faith they are enabled to experience their lives, and the life of the parish, as a dynamic sharing in the history of salvation. That experience, in turn, becomes a powerful motive for evangelization. Everything you do to ensure the correct and worthy celebration of the Eucharist and the other sacraments, precisely because it leads the faithful to a deep and transforming encounter with God, builds up the Church in her inner life and as the visible sign of salvation for the world. Preaching and catechesis should emphasize that the grace of the sacraments is what enables us to live in accordance with the demands of the Gospel. Adoration of the Eucharist outside of the Mass permits a deeper appreciation of the gift that Christ makes to us in his Body and Blood in the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar. Encouragement of frequent recourse to the Sacrament of Penance increases the spiritual maturity of all parishioners as they strive to commit themselves to witnessing to the truth of the Gospel in private and public life.<sup>5</sup> The strength of parish life in your country can be judged above all from the way families pass on the faith to each succeeding generation, and from the impressive and essential system of Catholic schools that you and your predecessors have built and sustained at great sacrifice. As a priest and Bishop I have always been convinced that ministry to families is an extremely important dimension of the Church's evangelizing task since "the family itself is the first and most appropriate

place for teaching the truths of the faith, the practice of Christian virtues and the essential values of human life" (*Address at Our Lady of Guadalupe Plaza*, San Antonio, September 13, 1987, No. 4). Catholic schools for their part must have a specific Catholic identity, and those who administer them and teach in them have a responsibility to uphold and communicate the truths, values and ideals which constitute a truly Catholic education. Many of your parishes have committed themselves to winning inactive Catholics back to the practice of the faith and to reaching out to all those in search of the truth of the Gospel. These efforts are a profound expression of the essential missionary nature of the Church which should mark every parish community. I am aware of the complexities of parish life in the United States and of the burden of work borne by priests, deacons, religious, and laity as they face the daily challenge of inspiring God's people to live the Gospel more fully and build a society imbued with Christian values. Be close to all those who work in parishes, sustaining them with your prayer and wise counsel, endeavoring to create in everyone the *sensus Ecclesiae*, a vivid sense of what belonging to the Church means in practical terms.<sup>6</sup> At the recent Special Session for America of the Synod of Bishops, the Bishops called on all the faithful to be "evangelists of the new millennium", by witnessing to the faith through lives of holiness, kindness to all, charity to those in need and solidarity with all the oppressed (cf. *Message to America*, No. 30). In living the faith and communicating it to others in a culture that tends to treat religious convictions as merely a personal "option," evangelization's only point of departure is Jesus Christ, "the Way, and the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14:6), the answer to the question that is every human life. As you lead the Church in the United States in preparation for the Great Jubilee, help everyone in the Catholic community to understand that we know, love, worship, and serve God, not as a response to some psychological "need," but as a duty whose fulfillment is an expression of man's highest dignity and the source of man's most profound happiness. An essential part of your ministry must be to help all sectors of the Catholic community find greater certainty about what the Church actually teaches, and greater serenity in confronting the many issues which - often needlessly - cause division and polarization among those who should be of one mind and heart (cf. Acts 2:44). As the recent Synod said, all must be encouraged "to turn from hesitant and wary steps, to walk in joy with Jesus on the road to everlasting life" (*Message to America*, No. 37). Because Christians have come to know Christ and the liberating force of his Gospel, they have a particular responsibility to contribute to the renewal of culture. In this task, which pertains in a special way to the laity, Christ's followers should not cease to make present in all areas of public life the light which Christ's teaching sheds on the human condition. In contemporary culture there is often a weakening of the sense of the innate dependence of all human existence on the Creator, the capacity of the human mind to know the truth, and the validity of the universal and unchanging moral norms which guide all people in the fulfillment of their human vocation. When freedom is detached from the truth about the human person and from the moral law inscribed in human nature, then society and its democratic form of life are imperiled. For if freedom is not linked to truth and ordered to goodness, "the ground is laid for society to be at the mercy of the unrestrained will of individuals or the oppressive totalitarianism of public authority" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 96). In proclaiming the truths about the human person, human community and human destiny that they know from revelation and reason, Christians make an indispensable contribution to sustaining a free society, a society in which freedom nurtures genuine human development.<sup>7</sup> Dear Brother Bishops, as we approach the next Christian Millennium, encourage all Catholics in the United States to deepen their commitment to the Church's evangelizing mission. Lead them by your example, your conviction and your teaching. I pray that the Holy Spirit will enlighten you and help you to inspire your people, so that the hearts of the faithful will burn more brightly with love for Christ and a desire to make him better known. Entrusting you and all the priests, religious and laity of your Dioceses to Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing. © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

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