



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE ECCLESIASTICAL PROVINCES
OF LOUISVILLE, MOBILE AND NEW ORLEANS
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

31 March 1998

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. Following the visits of other groups of Bishops of the United States, I now warmly welcome you, the Bishops of the ecclesiastical provinces of Louisville, Mobile and New Orleans. Through you I greet each member of the Dioceses in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the Church of God (cf. Acts 20:28). In a special way I thank God for the bonds of communion which unite us in the episcopal ministry at the service of his holy people. The Church's experience since the Second Vatican Council illustrates how important the ministry of the Bishop is for the renewal which the Council advocated and for the new evangelization which must be undertaken on the threshold of the Third Christian Millennium. And so I propose to reflect today on some of the more fundamental aspects of this ministry of ours, which comes to us from the Apostles "in a sequence running back to the beginning" (*Lumen Gentium*, 20).

2. In your document *The Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop*, you drew attention to an important truth: the episcopal ministry is a crucial part of God's saving work in human history. It cannot be reduced to "a variation of the common human need for organization and authority" (*loc.cit.*, 1, A, 1). It is in fact by the mandate and command of Christ that Bishops teach "the unchanging faith of the Church as it is to be understood and lived today" (*ibid.*, 1, A, 2). This duty can only be understood and fulfilled in the context of a Bishop's personal adherence to the faith. In fact, the Lord's mandate to his Apostles to teach in his name is not without a connection to a profound act of faith on their part: the act of faith by which the apostles, with Peter, recognized that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of the living God"(Mt 16:16). That same profession of faith in Christ

must always be at the heart of a Bishop's life and ministry.

In his Diocese the Bishop declares the faith of the Church with the authority which derives from his episcopal ordination and from communion with the College of Bishops under its Head (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 22). His task is to teach in a pastoral way, illuminating modern problems with the light of the Gospel and helping the faithful to live full Christian lives amid the challenges of our times (cf. *Directory on the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops*, 56). In applying the Gospel to new issues while safeguarding the authentic interpretation of the Church's teaching, the Bishop ensures that the local Church abides in the truth which saves and liberates. All this requires that the Bishop be a man of firm supernatural faith and steadfast loyalty to Christ and his Church.

3. Our teaching carries with it a great responsibility since it is "endowed with the authority of Christ" (*Lumen Gentium*, 25); yet we must teach and preach with great humility since we are the servants of the word, not its masters. If we are to be effective teachers, we must allow our entire existence to be transformed by prayer and the continuous submission of ourselves to God in imitation of Christ himself. To satisfy the thirst among the People of God for the truth of the Gospel, we Bishops should take heed of Saint Charles Borromeo's words to his priests at his last Synod: "Is your duty preaching and teaching? Concentrate carefully on what is essential to fulfil that office fittingly. Make sure in the first place that your life and conduct are sermons in themselves" (*Liturgy of the Hours*, Feast of Saint Charles).

Preaching the Gospel message effectively requires constant personal prayer, study, reflection, and consultation with knowledgeable advisers. Commitment to the study and scholarship demanded by the *munus episcopale* is crucial in guarding "the truth that has been entrusted to us by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us" (cf. 2 Tim 1:14) and in proclaiming it with power "in and out of season" (*ibid.*, 4:2). Since the Bishop has a personal responsibility to teach the faith, he needs time to assimilate the content of the Church's tradition and magisterium prayerfully. Likewise, he should be familiar with helpful developments in theology, in biblical studies and in moral reflection on social issues. I know from my own experience as a diocesan Bishop the many demands that are made on a Bishop's time. Yet that experience convinced me that it is essential to make time, intentionally, for study and reflection. For it is only through study and reflection and prayer that the Bishop, working with his collaborators, can guide and govern in a truly Christian and ecclesial manner, always asking himself: "What is the truth of faith that sheds light on the problem we are addressing?" Thus the Bishop today may need to re-organize the way in which he exercises his episcopal office in order to attend to what is fundamental in his ministry.

4. The Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 calls us to redouble our efforts to preach the Gospel in response to the deep-rooted desire for spiritual truth that characterizes our times. This "hour" of evangelization makes special demands on Bishops. In *The Teaching Ministry of the Diocesan Bishop*, you identified the qualities which render a Bishop's teaching effective. Through his pastoral experience, study, reflection, judgment and prayer, he must make the salvific truth his

own so that he can communicate the fullness of faith and encourage the faithful in living according to the demands of the Gospel. The Bishop is charged with transmitting the faith he has received; hence he must see his teaching as a humble service to the word of God and the Church's tradition. Being ready to suffer for the sake of the Gospel (cf. 2 Tim 1:8), he must proclaim the truth courageously, even if this means challenging socially acceptable opinion. The Bishop should teach frequently and constantly, preaching homilies, writing pastoral letters, giving conferences and making use of the media, in such a way that he is seen to teach the faith and so bear public witness to the Gospel. Moreover, his teaching should be marked by charity, in accordance with Paul's words to Timothy: "the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to every one, an apt teacher, forbearing, correcting his opponents with gentleness" (2 Tim 2:24-25).

5. "Tend the flock of God that is your charge" (1 Pet 5:2). Any reflection on your responsibility for the pastoral governance of that part of God's People entrusted to you "as the vicars and ambassadors of Christ" (*Lumen Gentium*, 27) must begin from careful consideration of the example of Christ himself, the Good Shepherd, our supreme model. In the recent Special Assembly for America of the Synod of Bishops, many Pastors raised questions about the example of their own lives and ministry, knowing that the People of God will heed their voice and respond if their witness is perceived as authentic. In the Synod Hall we heard the call for Bishops as individuals and as a body to become more simple, with the simplicity of Jesus and of the Gospel - a simplicity which consists in being immersed in the essential things of the Father (cf. Lk 2:49).

In order to meet the needs of modern times, Dioceses have frequently developed complex structures and a variety of diocesan offices which provide assistance in the exercise of pastoral government. As Bishops, however, you must be careful to safeguard the personal nature of your governance, devoting much time to knowing the strengths and weaknesses of your Dioceses, the faithful's expectations and needs, their traditions and charisms, the social context in which they live, and the long-term problems which need to be addressed. This means ensuring that the structures necessary today in leading a diocese do not impede the very thing they are meant to facilitate: a Bishop's contact with his people and his role as an evangelist. In the Synod it was pointed out that it is all too easy today for a Bishop to yield his evangelizing and catechizing responsibility to others and become a captive of his own administrative obligations. Since our ministry is always directed to the building up of the body of the Church in truth and holiness (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 27), the exercise of episcopal authority is never a mere administrative necessity but a witness to the truth about God and man revealed in Jesus Christ and a service for the good of all. In order to lead people to the fullness of Jesus Christ we must in fact "do the work of the evangelist" (2 Tim 4:5). No other task is as urgent as this.

6. In a special way a diocesan Bishop must make every effort to maintain a close relationship with his priests, a relationship characterized by charity and concern for their spiritual and material well-being. In promoting an atmosphere of mutual confidence and trust, he is to be a teacher, father, friend and brother to them (cf. *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops*, 107). In this way the

juridical bond of obedience between priest and Bishop is animated by that supernatural charity which existed between Christ and his disciples. This pastoral charity and spirit of communion between Bishop and priests is vital for the effectiveness of the apostolate. Likewise, it must be the Bishop's special care to reach out to young men whom Christ is calling to share in his priesthood through the ordained ministry. Experience has shown that when the local Bishop takes this responsibility seriously, there is no "vocation shortage". Young men want to be called to radical self-giving, and the Bishop, insofar as he is the one principally responsible for the continuation of Christ's saving mission in the world, is the one who can repeat Christ's words with authority: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Mt 4:19).

The relation between the Bishop and members of religious communities should likewise be inspired by his esteem for the consecrated life and his commitment to making the various charisms known in the local Church, again with an eye to inviting young people to live out their baptismal grace by generously embracing the evangelical counsels. Moreover, since the Council we are all more aware of the need to recognize, safeguard and promote the dignity, rights and duties of the lay faithful. It is essential that their service to the ecclesial community, their counsel, and their efforts to bring the Church's teaching to bear on contemporary culture through the transformation of intellectual, political and economic life be appreciated and encouraged by the Bishop and his close collaborators.

7. The aftermath of the Second Vatican Council witnessed the development of Episcopal Conferences as instruments for exercising that collegiality among Bishops which springs from ordination and hierarchical communion. The Conference exists to foster the sharing of pastoral experience and to allow for a common approach to various questions that arise in the life of the Church in a particular region or country. Your recent decision to study the structure and functions of your Conference suggests that you recognize a need to rethink its operations so that they may better serve the pastoral and evangelical purposes that give the Conference its unique meaning.

Among other things, this means that the Episcopal Conference must find a way to be truly effective without weakening the teaching and pastoral authority which belongs to Bishops alone. Its administrative structures must not become ends in themselves but always remain instruments of the great tasks of evangelization and ecclesial service. Special care must be taken to ensure that the Conference functions as an ecclesial body and not as an institution reflecting the management models of secular society. In this way each Bishop will be enabled to bring his unique gifts to bear on the discussions and decisions of the Conference. The Bishop's duty to teach, sanctify and govern is in fact a personal one which cannot be surrendered to others.

8. We can never remind ourselves too often that the Pastors of the Church are personally responsible for passing on the light and joy of the faith. To say this is immediately to confront the question of our own faith and conviction. Your *ad Limina* visit, with your prayer at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, offers a grace-filled occasion to remember how essential to your witness

is your own relationship to Christ and the seriousness of your personal quest for holiness. The vitality of your local Churches and the well-being of the universal Church is first and always a gift of the Holy Spirit. But that gift is not independent of the ardent prayer and self-giving pastoral charity of the Bishops, as individuals and as a body. In our weaknesses we need to be sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit in order to be able to say without fear: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (Jn 6:68,69). On the two thousandth anniversary of the Incarnation, may the Church — the Bride — offer her Lord an episcopal college united and steadfast in faith, ardent in bearing witness to the Gospel of God's grace, and dedicated to the ministration of the Spirit and of God's glorious power to make men just (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 21).

Dear Brothers, with these reflections on your ministry, I wish to encourage you in the grace and vocation that Christ has bestowed upon you. I pray for you as you go about your task of proclaiming the love of God and the mysteries of salvation to all, confident that the Holy Spirit will guide and fortify you. In gratitude for your work in preaching the word of God "with unfailing patience and sound teaching"(2 Tim 4:2), I commend you to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, *Sedes Sapientiae*, that she may sustain you in pastoral wisdom and bring joy and peace to your hearts. To you and the priests, religious and lay faithful of your Dioceses, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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