



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS
OF TURKEY ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Monday, 19 February 2001

1. I joyfully welcome you for your visit *ad limina Apostolorum* today. I thank Bishop Louis Pelâtre, Latin-rite Vicar Apostolic of Istanbul and President of your Episcopal Conference, for his cordial words summarizing the situation of the Church in your country and expressing your concern as Pastors, as well as the difficulties and hopes of your communities.

I cannot speak of your Church without returning to the sources of our faith, to the early days of evangelization in Asia Minor by the Lord's Apostles. The Gospel, in fact, first blossomed in your land: it was there that the Church grew, was established and organized around illustrious Bishops such as St Polycarp of Smyrna and St Ignatius of Antioch; it was there that the faith of the Church was later consolidated at the first seven Ecumenical Councils in Nicaea, Ephesus, Chalcedon and Constantinople. Moreover, how can we forget all that the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa and John Chrysostom, did to increase our understanding of the faith! Here is a wealth and heritage shared by all your Dioceses, whatever their rite, which is an invitation, even in today's modest circumstances, to follow in the footsteps of this great tradition of acceptance and meditation on the Word of God and of personal sanctification for the glory of God and the proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ.

2. I was very pleased to share prayerfully in your joy as Pastors and in that of all Christian people at the recent celebrations in Istanbul in honour of Bl. John XXIII. I appreciated the action of the Turkish authorities, who wished in this way to honour the memory of the "Pope, friend of the Turks", by naming after him the street where the historic building of the former Apostolic Delegation in Turkey stands and by organizing a full programme of cultural events to celebrate this occasion. These festivities have also been marked by important religious celebrations; in this connection I would like to acknowledge the fraternal participation of His Holiness Bartholomew I,

Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, of His Beatitude Mesrob II, Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul, of Metropolitan Çeltin, Patriarchal Vicar of the Syrian Orthodox, and of the representatives of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, as well as the presence of representatives of the Jewish community and the Muslim authorities. This participation by different members of Turkish society shows the great influence of the blessed's personality and the cordial understanding among all the country's inhabitants, with respect for different beliefs and religious practices. The Catholic community of Turkey was also delighted with the significant participation in these celebrations of Bishops representing the Episcopal Conferences of European countries, thus recalling Turkey's close ties with Europe and the positive role which Catholics can play on this continent. May the example and prayer of the blessed and good Pope John enlighten and encourage your pastoral ministry today!

3. To carry out her mission, the Church in Turkey must strengthen her bonds of communion with the universal Church: this is the profound meaning of what you are doing today by this *ad limina* visit, which is also an experience of fraternal communion among yourselves in order to continue your collaborative efforts within the Episcopal Conference. You are concerned to maintain and to develop relations of good understanding with all the country's inhabitants, showing your concern for everyone you meet. You are also pursuing a patient, determined dialogue with the public authorities; this is how the Church, as an institution and a group of communities of the faithful, will increasingly find her place in national life. In fact, freedom of religion and worship, which is inseparable from freedom of conscience, is an essential element for social harmony at the local level. Every State, with the help of all its inhabitants, is called to be vigilant in this area, in order to strengthen relations within the country and to consolidate its place in the concert of nations and in multilateral relations. You know that it is in this spirit that the Holy See, for its part, works for greater understanding between peoples.

4. Two years ago your Episcopal Conference started the project of an *Ecclesial Assembly*, which will soon take shape in meetings at the diocesan and national level. I am delighted with the results of this pastoral dialogue among Bishops, and I encourage you to continue in this direction: it is a living expression of the *affectus collegialis*, whose value was restored by the Second Vatican Council and which enables you to support each other in the care of your mission. This gathering, just after the year of grace and mercy of the Great Jubilee, will give new ardour and zeal to your Christian communities, often frail and dispersed, so that the Church in Turkey can advance in the new millennium with confidence and courage, inspiring Christians "who are always prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls them to account for the hope that is in them" (cf. 1 Pt 3: 15). I firmly encourage you to carry through this important project, taking care that all the members of the ecclesial community feel involved: priests, religious and especially lay people, who must take an ever more active and responsible part in the Church's life and mission.

5. It is important that the Church of Christ be truly involved in the life of Turkish society. This requires a considerable work of adaptation, already widely begun in the liturgy, the translation of

the Word of God and catechetical texts; it also involves an important investment, to which you are committed, so that the priests and religious who come to Turkey can learn the country's language, history, customs and culture.

Is it not necessary to take a further step and to work patiently and perseveringly to foster vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life among Turkey's young Catholics? In contemporary society, so avid for immediate gratification, it is not easy for people to hear Christ's call to leave everything and to follow him in self-giving, celibacy and chastity offered for the love of God and others. Youth, as you have noted, do not lack generosity and idealistic aspirations; they can accept this call if they have ready and attentive witnesses at their side. I therefore encourage you to redouble your efforts to support the pastoral care of vocations, seeking together the most appropriate ways to form the future priests of your Churches, either in your country or by seeking the help of other Dioceses, particularly in Europe, to which your country is tied. Local structures for the discernment of vocations and for the first stage of priestly formation will certainly give new energy to the pastoral care of vocations. It is essential, in all cases, that the young men who are thinking of the priesthood can come together in a meaningful way to share their searching, their aspirations, their discovery of Christ with the help of teachers who are at their disposal. Moreover, community life in the seminary is essential for teaching them how to grow humanly and in faith, to create unity in themselves and their lives through intimacy with Christ, as well as for learning to be pastors of the Church who are conscious of being members of one presbyterate.

6. The future of the Church and of society as a whole depends, in a certain way, on today's young people. I know the attention that you and other adults are paying to the circumstances in which they live. In the *Ecclesial Assembly* you are preparing, they will be able to express their hopes and expectations. You are already contributing to the education of Turkish youth, in which the Catholic schools participate, thanks to the skill and dedication of the religious congregations that run them.

Bring all of them the Pope's greeting and encouragement. The formation of young Christians is also a concern for you, and I am delighted with the fruits of collaboration between communities of different rites, while I ask families to be more and more involved along with their pastors, so that young people will receive the necessary instruction for a solid Christian life. May all families be more aware of the importance of passing on the faith to the younger generation, which requires that the parents themselves have a good Christian formation and can, if necessary, take an active part in catechesis!

7. The work of growth and renewal that you want to undertake with the whole Church calls for the genuine formation of lay people, for this is often the occasion for a profound reawakening of their spiritual life and of their sense of ecclesial responsibility. This formation is particularly important for your minority communities, so that they can live the dialogue of life with all the members of the nation, without anxiety or the temptation to withdraw into themselves. It is important that the faithful receive good formation, not only in order to know Christian doctrine, but also to bear

witness to a living spirituality and faith through their prayer life, their commitments and their sharing in the reflection on society's problems.

8. Your quinquennial reports often stress the difficulties regarding marriage in a society where the Christian ideal of fidelity and indissolubility is poorly grasped. It is the task of pastors to support Christian families in their daily life, for they "bear a very valuable witness to Christ before the world when they remain faithful to the Gospel and hold up the example of Christian marriage throughout their lives" (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 11). Meetings between couples, like those in the past, are valuable occasions of mutual support for their conjugal and family life. Families can thus be places of human, moral and spiritual education for young people.

9. You told me of the good relations that exist between Christian brothers and sisters of different confessions, and I am pleased with this. Do not be afraid to be resolutely involved in the ecumenical task: it is by deepening our mutual knowledge and by learning to work together, whenever possible, that unity makes progress, although there is necessarily a long way to go. All the signs already given during the Jubilee Year are an encouragement for new progress in the common journey towards full unity. In the year 2001 we will be able to celebrate Easter on the same day.

May this be a call, as I wrote recently, "for a full return to that exchange of gifts which enriched the Church of the first millennium. May the memory of the time when the Church breathed with "both lungs" spur Christians of East and West to walk together in unity of faith and with respect for legitimate diversity, accepting and sustaining each other as members of the one Body of Christ!" (*Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 48).

10. You come into daily contact with Islam through the country's culture and through personal meetings. Because of this specific situation, you have acquired a tradition and an experience of interreligious dialogue, and you are aware of its demands. Continue your efforts to create and encourage opportunities for dialogue, in daily life first of all, and in the different areas of human interaction which it offers: school, which brings together children and young people of all beliefs, the engagements of professional and social life, the service of solidarity and mutual aid. It is here that believers can become better acquainted with one another and develop mutual esteem in their common efforts for justice and peace, thus sowing the seeds of a truly fraternal society that is respectful of personal convictions. But this also goes hand in hand with more institutional dialogues, which already exist. I note with interest the fruitful relations which have been established between the State University of Ankara and the Pontifical Gregorian University, and the cooperation prompted by the preparation for the celebrations in honour of Pope John XXIII.

As Turkey prepares to establish new relations with Europe, the vocation of the country's Catholic community seems even clearer. Bearing witness to the Good News of Jesus our Saviour enables individuals and cultures to meet and shows that new bridges can be built, despite the hostilities of

the past and the disagreements or misunderstandings which could arise. This desire for acceptance and reconciliation is called dialogue (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 92). Today more than ever it takes the form of a dialogue between cultures, which is required of all nations. The various religions can and must make a decisive contribution in this regard. Reciprocal openness between the followers of different religions can greatly serve the cause of peace and the common good of humanity (cf. *Message for the World Day of Peace*, 8 December 2000, n. 16).

11. Your mission requires many apostolic resources in terms of people and material goods; I know the poverty of your Dioceses and the lack of priests which affects you all. In this situation, I would first like to invite you to find strength of soul and encouragement in meditation on the Letters of St Paul, who experienced difficulties very similar to yours and who traveled your roads many times to support the communities he visited. May you also draw new energy from the appeal I made to the whole Church at the end of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, which represents, as it were, a programme for the years to come. We must first of all commit ourselves with greater confidence in pastoral work that gives personal and community prayer its proper place. This means "observing an essential principle of the Christian view of life: *the primacy of grace*. There is a temptation which perennially besets every spiritual journey and pastoral work: that of thinking that the results depend on our ability to act and to plan.... We then share the experience of the disciples in the Gospel story of the miraculous catch of fish: "We have toiled all night and caught nothing' (*Lk* 5: 5). This is the moment of faith, of prayer, of conversation with God, in order to open our hearts to the tide of grace and allow the word of Christ to pass through us in all its power: *Duc in altum!* On that occasion, it was Peter who spoke the word of faith: "At your word I will let down the nets' (*ibid.*)" (*Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 38).

Dear Brothers in the episcopate and the priesthood, may I tell you once again of all my confidence, using the Lord's words: *Duc in altum! Put out into the deep! Go even further!*, to build a living Church, open and confident about her future, in the hope and expectation of the abundant harvest that the Lord will provide.

Express my gratitude and affectionate greeting to your priests and religious, who are so devoted to their apostolic work, and to the lay people of your communities, especially the young. The future of the Church in Turkey greatly depends on their daily witness: may they know how much the Church encourages them and counts on them! I entrust all of them, as well as you and your common work, to the protection of the Virgin Mary, the Blessed Mother of God and our Mother. I cordially give you all my Apostolic Blessing.