



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE LATIN BISHOPS IN THE ARAB REGIONS
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 17 March 2001

Your Beatitude,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I am pleased to receive you during your *ad limina* visit, which expresses your communion with the Successor of Peter. I hope that in your meetings with the Bishop of Rome and his collaborators you will find the necessary encouragement to give new spiritual energy and apostolic zeal to the people entrusted to your pastoral care.

I thank His Beatitude Michel Sabbah, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, for his cordial words to me on your behalf. They show how deeply committed you are to proclaiming the Gospel. Through you, the Latin Bishops in the Arab Regions, my mind and heart are joined to the priests, religious and all the faithful of your Dioceses, who, in diverse situations, bear courageous witness to the Lord Jesus. May God support and guide them each day!

I deeply cherish my memories of the pilgrimages I had the joy of making during the Jubilee Year in the land where God manifested himself to human beings, from Mount Sinai to Jerusalem, the Holy City, where Christ died and rose for humanity's salvation. I ask God to grant me the grace to continue my pilgrimage by soon visiting the places linked to the conversion of the Apostle Paul and the missionary zeal of the first Christian communities in Syria.

2. As I wrote in the Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, which I addressed to all the local Churches at the end of the Great Jubilee, now is the time for "each local Church to assess its fervour and find fresh enthusiasm for its spiritual and pastoral responsibilities by reflecting on what the Spirit has been saying to the People of God in this special year of grace, and indeed in the

longer span of time from the Second Vatican Council to the Great Jubilee" (n. 3). Indeed, it is essential that Christian communities put out into the deep with determination, strengthened by the graces they received from the Lord during the Jubilee Year and inspired by a hope that is firmly rooted in contemplation of the face of Christ.

The Pastoral Synod, which for the first time brought together the members of all the Catholic communities in the Holy Land, ended a year ago. I strongly encourage you to implement the pastoral plan that resulted from your ecclesial journey: "Faithful to Christ, Co-responsible in the Church, Witnesses in Society".

Your communities, which live as minorities in societies whose culture and daily life are deeply marked by the presence of other religions, must tirelessly continue to deepen their Christian identity in order to preserve their Gospel authenticity. They must never forget that Christians find their personal and ecclesial identity in their close relationship with Christ, which helps them to live in all situations and illumines their decisions, and not in their own actions or personal options in society.

In this way they will fearlessly open themselves to others and help to make God's loving face shine among the nations. May they remember that turning to Christ, the Incarnate Word, and walking with him on the paths of holiness lead to rejecting every kind of mediocrity and superficial religiosity in order to penetrate ever more deeply into his mystery!

The witness given to Christ and participation in building his Body also require the development of authentic communion within the Church, especially through an ever more trusting relationship between pastors and faithful and regular pastoral cooperation with generous openness of mind and heart between the various Catholic communities. May parishes and families be living centres of unity and authentic love! For, "to make the Church *the home and the school of communion*: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings" (Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 43). It is by making this communion a reality that the Church shows herself to be a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 1).

3. In this same perspective, lay people are asked to play an increasingly important role in the Church's life and witness, so as to account effectively for the hope that is in them (cf. 1 Pt 3: 15).

The laity's awareness of their vocation and mission is a source of comfort and deep joy. Therefore, they should be shown a trust that will spur them to live in fidelity to the Gospel and the Magisterium of the Church and to assume their responsibilities by taking an active part in the life of their communities at various levels. Their involvement in the conduct of public affairs, wherever possible, is also very important, especially in the area of justice and peace.

It is therefore indispensable to continue your efforts to form the laity so that they can acquire real competence in all that social, economic and political life entails. By engaging in intellectual research and study, lay people will also help to develop a true Christian culture, in collaboration with the other Churches, thereby offering society a Christian view of the human person and of the principles that can direct the action of those who put themselves at the service of their brethren. Pastoral guidance at Catholic universities is important for helping the laity to translate their faith into their own culture and to take their place in the Church's mission.

4. In your ministry of service to communion in the Church, priests are your closest co-workers. I cordially greet them through you, inviting them to put unconditional trust in the One who has called them and who is constantly at their side to guide them in their task of proclaiming the Gospel and educating believers in the faith. As they face the great challenges of evangelization, may they not be afraid to stake their whole life on Christ and generously abandon themselves to him! By opening their hearts fully to God's love and by listening to their brothers and sisters, they will continue to grow as men of hope and of familiarity with God.

Therefore, priests must return constantly to the source of their ministry, in order to find new apostolic zeal. Their missionary activity will bear fruit to the extent that they strengthen their spiritual life by celebrating and frequently receiving the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, privileged places of communion. Through an intense life of personal and community prayer, the heart of priestly life and the condition for all fruitful pastoral action under the influence of the Spirit, they will enter into ever more intimate dialogue with the Lord, whom it is their mission to proclaim to their brethren. In acquiring great personal familiarity with the Word of God, accepted with a docile and prayerful heart, they will be able to proclaim the Gospel authentically and to lead the faithful to an ever deeper knowledge of the mystery of God.

Continuing formation, especially through reading, meetings for reflection and prayer, as well as participation in theological and pastoral education programmes, is an essential task for every priest if he is to remain faithful to his identity and mission in the Church and for the Church.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I am aware of your concern to foster priestly and religious vocations and to communicate Christ's call. I encourage you in your efforts to give basic formation to candidates for the priesthood. Take care to provide them with good intellectual, theological, biblical and spiritual formation! However, it is indispensable that it be based on a human formation "that will help them acquire personal maturity and make them attentive to the cultural complexity in which they will have to carry out their ministry" (Apostolic Exhortation *Une espérance nouvelle pour le Liban*, n. 62).

5. In many areas of diocesan life there are religious institutes whose members work generously and collaborate actively in diocesan ministry. Assure them of my prayer and give them my affectionate encouragement! In certain regions, the presence of men and women religious is

essential for the Church's visibility. Through their various commitments, they contribute to people's human and spiritual advancement, without distinction of origin or religion, especially in the areas of education, health care and social services. I thank God for what they have done and are doing, along with those who work with them, to serve all in a spirit of exemplary selflessness. By their lives given entirely to God and to their brethren, they are a reference-point for the young people who attend their educational institutions and for all who benefit from their support and devotion. May they continue to bear witness with their whole lives to a Church that is a true place of brotherhood, sharing, renewal, hope and openness to others!

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, the Church's presence in schools and education has a particularly significant importance. Catholic schools are places where children can receive a solid formation to prepare for their future. They are also places for the dialogue of life among young people of different religious traditions and social backgrounds. I urge you to continue fostering, in collaboration with the other Catholic communities, the renewal of catechesis and the development of pastoral care based on sound values, in order to help form the type of men and women that the Church and society need.

6. The division among Christians is an infidelity to the will of the Lord which obscures their identity as disciples of Christ. Now that we have entered the third millennium, we must resolutely show the Church's commitment to promoting unity, aware that if we do not ardently seek to be faithful to the Lord's intense prayer "that all may be one", we risk weakening our Christian identity and credibility in proclaiming the Gospel of peace and reconciliation. The division of Christians often separates people who live side by side in daily life, who love one another and who, on essential points, share the same faith in Christ and Baptism; this brings great suffering to families. These difficult situations must not discourage us but spur us to work with conviction for communion and forgiveness. In all the Arab regions the Latin Church must courageously pursue her efforts for fraternal encounter and collaboration with the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, confident that ecumenical dialogue will only progress if it involves the concrete life of the faithful.

May the ardent desire for unity be present in your pastoral activities, especially in continuing your reflection and commitment regarding issues of common interest by praying and acting together whenever possible! The ecumenical opening of the Jubilee Year in Bethlehem was a great hope which should foster a brotherly atmosphere between the Churches and Ecclesial Communities, so that they will advance with serenity, confidence and mutual esteem towards the unity so deeply desired.

7. The conditions in which the Christian community in the Middle East, especially in the Holy Land, has to live do not always allow its members to lead the sort of personal and family life they would like for themselves and their children. I strongly encourage Christians to maintain their self-confidence and to remain firmly attached to the land which was also that of their ancestors. I repeat to them forcefully: "Do not be afraid to preserve your Christian presence and heritage in

the very place where the Saviour was born!" (*Homily in Bethlehem*, 22 March 2000, n. 5). It is particularly important that Christians remain in Jerusalem and in Christianity's Holy Places, for the Church cannot forget her roots. She must bear witness to the vitality and fruitfulness of the Gospel message in the land of Revelation and the Redemption.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, you have made praiseworthy efforts to enable the faithful to live peacefully in these situations, giving them profound evangelical and ecclesial reasons not to yield to the temptation to abandon their land but to be ever more convinced of the importance of their presence and the beauty of their witness. Do not be resigned to the idea that leaving is inevitable! I am aware of the sacrifices and self-denial that this requires for the families and individuals who are generously willing to resist the temptation to seek economic prosperity and social peace elsewhere. On behalf of the Church, I am truly grateful to them. They can count on the support of God's grace and of their brothers and sisters in faith who look at them with admiration.

I also encourage you in your apostolic concern for Catholics from other countries, who are ever more numerous and generally come to your region in search of work; they need special pastoral care. Their witness of faith courageously lived among the men and women in your countries is an expression of the universality of salvation in Jesus Christ.

8. I know the great difficulties which the peoples of your countries must face. I would like in particular to assure all who suffer and are victims of violence of my closeness and affection. The entire Church suffers with you, in the hope of being able to rejoice with you soon in the fulfilment of one desire which no one can renounce: peace! "The Holy Land must be the land of peace and brotherhood. That is what God wants!" (*Peace Appeal*, 2 October 2000). The events currently unfolding in the Holy Land, which I am following with attention, are a cause of concern and severely test the hope of peace. I fervently hope that negotiations will soon be resumed and will focus all concern on respect for the dignity of every person, who has the right to live in peace and safety in his own territory. This will only be achieved by respecting international law and rejecting violence, which can only exacerbate hatred and feelings of bitterness, creating even greater dissension between individuals and communities. In these circumstances, it is more necessary than ever to appeal for dialogue, personal contact and the love that each person feels for others and for all mankind, in order not to overlook any possibility that could open prospects for a just and lasting peace. The importance of this hope does not allow us to be tempted by discouragement.

The Latin Church in the Holy Land and its neighbouring regions must always be willing to bear and to inspire sentiments of mutual understanding, dialogue and solidarity. It is through a true education in peace that hearts can at last be opened and minds engage resolutely in building societies based on brotherhood and mutual respect in justice.

Interreligious dialogue is also a privileged way to advance on the paths of peace. The search for a true and trustful dialogue with Judaism and Islam is one of the greatest and most urgent needs

which the Church cannot renounce for the good of all the peoples in the region. Such an attitude must also help to guarantee true religious freedom, so that no one will suffer discrimination or marginalization because of his religious belief, and so that the special status granted to one religion is not done to the detriment of the others.

Lastly, I would like to mention once again the critical situations that other countries are experiencing in your region. In Iraq the embargo continues to claim victims; too many innocent people are paying for the consequences of a destructive war whose effects continue to be felt by the weakest and most defenceless persons. The flow of refugees from Sudan to Egypt is rapidly increasing.

Solutions must therefore be urgently found to provide decent accommodations for the displaced persons and to allow these people to be properly integrated, as well as to offer spiritual assistance to the many Christians among them. My thoughts also turn to the Catholic community of Somalia, which in the past has been the victim of many acts of violence, in the hope that normal ecclesial life will at last be restored in this country. I once again assure all the communities and peoples of the region of the attention and affection that Peter's Successor has for them.

9. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, at the end of our meeting, I express my deep gratitude to you for the pastoral work which each of you carries out with devotion and profound love for the Church in serving the people entrusted to you, despite being often faced with very difficult conditions and sometimes loneliness. On your return home, bring the Pope's affection to all the Catholic faithful, whether of the Latin or the Eastern rite. He accompanies you with his prayer and asks you to foster ever closer bonds of love and cooperation between the Catholic communities.

May this wish be the best encouragement for your return to your particular Churches.

I therefore entrust your Dioceses to the motherly intercession of the Virgin Mary, Queen of Peace. May she protect and guide you on your way! I cordially impart a special Apostolic Blessing to each of you and to the priests, religious and lay faithful of your Dioceses.