



The Holy See

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

Tuesday, 11 June 2002

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. At the end of my first visit to your country, I took my leave in the firm hope that "the Church in Venezuela would bear a true witness to the presence of Jesus Christ and confront the challenges of the forthcoming millennium with courage" (*Farewell address*, 29 January 1985). Now, that the new millennium has begun bringing its difficult and unexpected challenges, with brotherly affection I welcome you on your *ad limina* visit, and encourage you in your ministry as pastors, guides and teachers of the pilgrim People of God in this beloved nation.

I cordially thank Archbishop Baltazar Porras of Mérida, President of the Bishops' Conference, for his kind words, that express your strong desire for full communion with the Successor of Peter, who has received the mission to strengthen his brethren in the faith (cf. Lk 22,32) and is the "perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity of faith and of communion" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 18). I am aware of your aspirations and anxieties as Bishops, which you wrote about in your quinquennial reports and have discussed at various meetings with the heads of the congregations and councils of the Roman Curia. You know that in the mystery of the Church, "if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together" (I Cor 12,26); so in your generous endeavours you can experience the power that comes from communion with the whole Church, and the support and concern of those who tend the People of God as their *amoris officium* (cf. St Augustine, *In Io. Ev.*, 123, 5).

2. I am happy to know that you have begun the First Plenary Council of Venezuela, convoked to unify "resources and aspirations in order to promote both the common good and the good of individual Churches" (*Christus Dominus*, n. 36), boosting a long term evangelizing action that at

the same time expresses the unanimous effort "to spread the faith and make the light of full truth dawn on all men" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 23).

In this regard, in the wake of the splendid experience of the Great Jubilee, I pointed out that one of the great challenges of the new millennium is to make the Church "the home and the school of communion", by following a deeply spiritual path, without which "external structures of communion [would] serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul" (*Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 43). For this reason, a particular Council, which is a deeply-rooted ecclesial event, must be lived and accepted as an authentic experience of the Spirit who guides his Church and keeps her in the unity of faith and charity. Its first fruit is communion among the Bishops who in turn are a principle of unity in the particular Churches they preside over.

I therefore ask you to foster the spirit of dialogue, fraternal accord and sincere collaboration at all the stages of this Council. Avoid any type of dissension that could cause disorientation among the faithful or be a pretext to create snares by those who seek interests that are contrary to the good of the Church.

3. Through closeness to your people and your daily pastoral work, be keenly aware of the deep and rapid social changes that condition the great work of evangelization. Today they oblige us "courageously [to] face a situation which is becoming increasingly diversified and demanding", (*ibid.*, n. 40). In this connection what is important is the renewal of catechesis, in which the Church carries out her mission "to strive calmly to show the strength and beauty of the doctrine of the faith" (*Fidei depositum*, n. 1). In fact, the secular culture, the atmosphere of religious indifference or the fragility of some once traditionally sound institutions as the family, schools and some ecclesial institutions, can impair the channels that transmit the faith and foster the Christian education of the new generations.

In this situation, remember that "in the cause of the Kingdom there is no time for looking back, even less for settling into laziness" (*Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 15). On the contrary, you must imbue pastors and catechists with new zeal, so that with their own witness and the creativity that they often use, they may find the most appropriate ways to bring the light of Christ to every Venezuelan, awakening the joyful wonder at his message and his presence. In this regard, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* will serve as a guide and inspiration for a renewed catechesis, that will be adapted to the educational levels of your faithful.

4. In the spirit of the Good Shepherd you often feel that "the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few" (Mt 9,37), and it is comforting that the Lord has blessed your country with a certain increase in new vocations, as well as the generous presence of people from other countries who so often are an example of the spirit of self-sacrificing service to the Gospel and of closeness to the sensitivity and needs of the people. You know the importance for them of the encouragement and esteem of their Pastors who should spare no effort to foster an atmosphere of brotherhood

among their main collaborators, their priests, and of genuineness among the various charisms that enrich each one of the particular Churches.

In addition to the timely directives which it is up to you, as guides, to provide, do not stop nourishing the spiritual life and the genuine desire for holiness of all who work with you in your apostolic mission, which is the deepest source of the great variety of pastoral activities. For this reason, because they are so often obliged to perform their mission in difficult conditions, they must base the joy of their service not on the desire of passing joys but on the aspiration to have "their names written in heaven" (Lk 10,20) proclaiming to others what they have seen and heard of the Lord (cf. Acts 4,20; 22,15).

5. In recent years, your country that can count on abundant natural and human resources has experienced a heartrending increase of poverty, even extreme poverty for many persons and families. The face of the suffering Christ becomes concrete in so many farm workers, indigenous persons, the urban marginalized, abandoned children, neglected elderly persons, abused women or unemployed youth. I know that all this is a pressing challenge to your pastoral concern, for it is impossible to pass by an injured neighbour on the other side of the road (cf. Lk 10,33-35); he so often needs immediate attention before we examine the reasons for his misfortune.

Through the self-denial of many individuals and the constant activity of numerous institutions, the Church has always given and continues to give the witness of divine mercy, showing generous and unconditional devotion to the neediest; this must become more and more a widespread general attitude of the whole Christian community, with the active collaboration of its members and the tireless promotion of a spirit of solidarity among all the people of Venezuela.

Together with these urgent needs that demand immediate attention, you are also aware of the need to help build a social order that is more just, peaceful, and profitable for all. In fact, without competing with what belongs to the public authorities, at times the Church will be called to give a voice to those whom no one seems to listen to, and "to discern in the events, the needs, and the longings which she shares with other people of our time, what may be genuine signs of the presence or of the purpose of God" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 11). Lastly, she feels called to seek loyal collaboration in the initiatives that aim at the integral good of the person and, for that reason, belong both to the specific mission of the Church and to the objectives of social organizations. Indeed, these cannot overlook or even less ignore the considerable contribution of the Church to many sectors belonging to the common good.

I know very well that this feature of your ministry is not always easy and that there are many distortions, intentional misinterpretations, and efforts to see the Church as favouring one party or another. However, party politics is not the area in which the Church operates. She wants to promote an atmosphere of open, constructive, patient and even-handed dialogue among all who have public responsibilities, in order to make prevail in society the dignity and inalienable rights of

the person, "to make our earth more fraternal and friendly, to make it a good place to live and to ensure that indifference, injustice and hatred will never have the last word" (*Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, 10 January 2002, n. 2; *ORE*, 16 January 2002, p. 2).

6. I entrust your pastoral ministry to the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is so beloved by your country under the title of Our Lady of Coromoto. I knelt in prayer before her during my last visit to Venezuela to implore her protection for the Venezuelan people and today I continue asking her that the Catholics of this beloved country may be "salt and light for others, true witnesses of Christ" (*Homily at the Shrine of Our Lady of Coromoto*, 10 February 1996, n. 6; *ORE*, 21 February 1996, p. 5).

While I ask you to transmit the greetings of the Pope to your faithful who does not forget them, and his special gratitude to the priests, the religious communities and all who are more directly involved in the passionate task of evangelization, I exhort you to work in reciprocal communion and in communion with the See of Peter for the cause of the Gospel and to you I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.