



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE SECOND GROUP OF FRENCH BISHOPS
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT**

Saturday, 6 December 2003

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,

1. I am happy to welcome you, Bishops and Diocesan Administrator who have come from the Provinces of Rennes and of Rouen, the region in western France which I have had the opportunity to visit on two occasions: on my way to Lisieux, to Saint-Laurent-sur-Sèvre and to Sainte-Anne d'Auray. I welcome you at the end of your *ad limina* visit, a time for meeting and working with the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia, and also a moment of spiritual replenishment in prayer at the tombs of the Apostles and in the celebration of communion with one another and with the Successor of Peter. I thank Archbishop Saint-Macary of Rennes for his report on your Dioceses and the important changes that you are experiencing in the life of the Christian communities as well as in the forms of exercising the ministry of priests. In turn, I would like to speak to you about a matter I have very much at heart, as do all the Bishops of the whole world: vocations to the priesthood and of the formation of priests.

2. For many years now, your Country has been experiencing a *serious vocational crisis*, a sort of journey through the desert that really tests the faith of the Pastors as well as of the faithful. Most of your quinquennial reports echo this. In 30 years, there has been a steady decrease in numbers that in recent years seems even to have accelerated. At the same time, many analyses have been made in an attempt to examine the causes of this phenomenon and remedy it. The French Dioceses have taken on many initiatives to give a fresh impetus to promoting vocations in order to awaken new awareness in Christian communities, to arouse youth, to remind priests of their duty regarding the call, to adapt places of formation and guarantee their effectiveness. Of course, the fruit of these multiple efforts has not matured yet and the crisis still exists. Its consequences on the vitality of the parishes and Dioceses in France are both disturbing in the short and long term.

Rather than giving in to despair at this situation, I urge you to confront the challenge with firm hope in order to build the future of your Churches. In this process you may be assured of the spiritual proximity and encouragement of the Successor of Peter.

3. In France, *seminaries* have a long history and a rich experience. The last Apostolic Visit to all the institutes of formation in your Country showed that they were, as a whole, reliable structures well adapted to help young men who hear the Lord's call to discern his will, and to train them to become well-disposed and competent pastors. Thus, seminaries continue to be an essential and necessary tool for the formation of candidates to the priesthood at the service of the Bishops (cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 60). Have at heart, therefore, with all your solicitude as Pastors, to maintain the quality of these formation houses by taking special care in choosing the formation staff. It is they who guarantee this ministry under your surveillance, taking pains to apply the *Ratio institutionis* voted by your Bishops' Conference and approved by the *Congregation for Catholic Education* in 1998!

The *Code of Canon Law* provides for one seminary per Diocese for the formation of future priests (can. 237). Of course, the current pastoral conditions do not allow for this everywhere, nor is it desirable: in fact, as experience shows, the reorganization of forces is often necessary and can also give rise to real dynamism. But the legislator, in his wisdom, wished to demonstrate the deep and intrinsic bond that exists between the diocesan Church and the formation of priests. In ordaining men for the service of the Christian communities who make a gift of their whole life and will be entrusted to act in Christ's name, the diocesan Bishop guarantees the life of the Church in the truth and continuity of her mystery as the Body of Christ, "a sign and an instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 1). This being so, how can the diocesan Church fail to be interested in the formation of her future pastors? This is why it is important that the seminary be a stable institution, recognizable and recognized in the Diocese, always figuring as *the* diocesan seminary, even if this seminary that accepts candidates from several Dioceses may be situated in another Diocese. While leaving the duty of discernment to the persons entrusted with this responsibility, the Bishop must try to take part in the life of the seminary by visiting it in person or by appointing a Delegate, and regularly meeting the formators and seminarians. I invite seminarians to root themselves progressively in the reality of their Dioceses by way of the necessary phases, especially when, for legitimate reasons related to study, the places of formation are far from the Dioceses.

In such a spirit, dialogue between the Bishops of France could be very useful in order to reflect together and with the formators in charge on the question of the distribution of the seminaries so that they are not too far from the Dioceses which send their candidates to them. Could not the new Provinces, recently created to improve your service of pastoral action, be a frame of reference permitting the Bishops to pool their available pastoral forces for a better formation of all priesthood candidates?

One should not forget that the mission of priests is expressed sacramentally and humanly in the solidarity of a single presbyterate united round the Bishop. Nor should it be forgotten that the common formation in the same seminary of priests from the same Diocese or Province undoubtedly fosters the spirit of unity, so necessary to help the Bishop to implement his pastoral decisions as well as enabling priests to fulfil their often difficult ministry in mutual and brotherly support.

4. As I stressed in the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (cf. nn. 43-59), I would like to recall the essential complementarity of the *four dimensions of formation*: human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral. It is these that the seminary, an "educational community in progress" (*ibid.*, n. 60), gradually imparts during the years of formation. The specific difficulties of young people today, particularly in the context of family life and emotional maturity, if one takes into account the social environment marked by the widespread relativism of "values" broadcast by the media, the trivialization of sexuality and the scandals connected with it, demand that special attention be paid to the human, emotional and moral formation of candidates. I encourage the teams of seminary staff to continue their work of formation and discernment in this area with the cooperation of competent specialists, to enable the young men they accept always to have a clear picture of the objective demands of priestly life and to shed light on their own life by a proper regard for the value of the gift of celibacy, prepared to live it generously in chastity as a gift of love offered to the Lord and to those entrusted to their care. I am counting on you, ultimately responsible for the formation of priests in your Dioceses, to watch carefully and rigorously over this aspect. "Here is the man" (Jn 19: 5), Pilate said prophetically, presenting Jesus to the crowd. In the human and affective formation of candidates to the priesthood, as in all other dimensions of their formation, it is indeed Christ, the incarnate Word, the new and perfect man, whom they must seek and contemplate; it is he they must take as their model (cf. I Cor 11: 1), imitating him in all things, to become a priest in his name.

5. Your diocesan Churches are involved in a thorough work of adaptation to the new situations, such as pastoral reorganization, the sharp fall in the number of priests and the opening of pastoral responsibilities to many lay faithful. These are tangible developments that must be taken into account in training new priests in order to make their formation increasingly sound and suitable. However, to succeed in this difficult and indispensable mission of *the formation of priests* and to overcome the current crisis, it will certainly be necessary to put out further and further into the deep (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 1).

To do this the Church must take care to see that her institutions are stable. She must discover more and more the treasure of the different vocations of the members that form her. Above all, she must recognize the true worth of the ministry of priests. She must understand that it is indispensable to her life since it assures the lasting presence of Christ in fidelity to the proclamation and teaching of his Word, in the precious gift of the Sacraments that give her life, especially the Eucharist and Reconciliation, and in the service of authority in the name of the Lord

and according to his style. A new deepening of Christian life, the inner renewal of the life of faith of everyone, Pastors and faithful, and the missionary outreach of Christian communities will inspire in the young new vocations for the Church.

6. It is important here that the Church, which calls young people to serve Christ, appear serene and confident in their eyes and in the eyes of families: "Come and see!" (Jn 1: 39). For this it is essential that those responsible for the presbyteral ministry feel that their Bishops and the Church support them. The *formation* team, chosen and appointed by the Bishop or, collegially, by all the Bishops responsible, needs this confidence if it is to carry out its mission among the young men in its care, as well as among the priests and lay people involved in the vocations apostolate. It is also right that young men who are thinking of becoming priests, consider their diocesan seminary as the correct place to train for the priesthood, to serve the diocesan Church in trusting obedience to the Bishop and without making special demands concerning the place of their formation. I should also like to recall that the acceptance of candidates from another Diocese must be made with discernment and must always comply with the canonical and pastoral measures in force (cann. 241-242). These are recalled in the *Instruction on the Admission to the Seminary of Candidates from Other Dioceses or Religious Families*. To this end, it seems desirable that the Bishops of France take part in a serene exchange of opinions in the context of the Bishops' Conferences on matters connected with the formation of priests without going back over work that is already behind them.

This will demonstrate ever more clearly to the faithful in general the unity of their views, without which their efforts risk losing their credibility. We must always remind ourselves of the insistent prayer of the Lord, who asked his Father that his disciples might "all be one... so that the world [might] believe" (Jn 17: 21). We must do our utmost to live among ourselves the demands of a communion that must be constantly built, verified and rebuilt, to make more and more visible the unity of the Body of Christ.

7. To prepare the future with hope, the Church must persevere and extend her action in vocations promotion and outreach to the young. It is they who will form the Church of the future and be the priests of tomorrow. In addition to giving thanks for their enthusiasm, so expressive at large gatherings such as the *World Youth Days* or the meetings you organize in your own Dioceses, and also for the generosity that enables them to engage in the service of social or humanitarian causes, it is right to help them respond in greater numbers than they do today to the special calls that the Lord does not fail to address to them. If there are many *difficulties* that hinder today's *young people* from answering this call, it seems possible to discern three major causes.

The first difficulty is the fear of long-term commitment, for there is the fear of taking a risk for an uncertain future, and we live in a changing world where interests seem ephemeral and essentially linked to instant gratification. This is certainly a major obstacle to young people's availability that can only be surmounted by imbuing in them trust in a prospect that is worthy of Christian hope.

The work of education, carried out first of all by the family and schools and continued in the various pastoral possibilities open to young people, is crucial for this. I am thinking in particular of the youth movements such as the scouts, chaplaincies and the various welcome centres offered to them where they can learn to trust adults, society, the Church, other young people and themselves.

The second difficulty concerns the presentation of the ministerial priesthood itself. Indeed, in several generations its forms have evolved considerably; the concept of it has sometimes been shaken by the outlook of many priests with regard to their own identity; it has often been cheapened in the eyes of public opinion. Today, the description of this ministry can still seem hazy, difficult to grasp by young people and lacking stability. It is thus important to uphold the ordained ministry. It should be given its proper place in the Church, in a spirit of communion that respects differences in true complementarity, and not one of competition that would be prejudicial to the laity.

The third, most fundamental, difficulty concerns the relationship of young people with the Lord himself. Their knowledge of Christ is often superficial and confused by the overwhelming choice of religious alternatives, whereas the desire to be a priest is essentially fostered by intimacy with the Lord in a truly personal dialogue, for it is first expressed as the desire to be with him (cf. Mk 3: 14).

Clearly, all that can encourage in children and young people a genuine discovery of the person of Jesus and of the living relationship with him, which is expressed in sacramental life, prayer and service to their brethren, will be beneficial in awakening vocations. Whether it is a matter of schools of prayer for children, retreats or prayer vigils for young people, or proposals of theological and spiritual formation adapted for youth, these could be said to be fertile and necessary ground in which God's call will put down roots and sprout until it bears fruit. Be watchful, therefore, to ensure that these different specialized, parallel services that work in close collaboration to nurture diocesan life, the family apostolate, catechesis and the pastoral care of young people are generously open to the prospect of vocations. This will give meaning to their action, thanks especially to the calls and proposals of the diocesan vocational services, responsible for making the diocesan Church's various members hear the Lord's call to the specific vocations of priests and deacons, but also vocations to the consecrated life.

8. At the end of these reflections that I have wanted to share with you expressing my concern and support for you in a difficult situation that is a trial for many, I would like to recall all the men and women who have dedicated themselves to this mission: the members of the [French] National Vocations Service and of the Diocesan Vocations Services, those in charge of youth ministry and especially the staff of the seminary formation teams. Although priests are fewer and fewer and the tasks incumbent on them are constantly accumulating, take care to be properly available to those whom you entrust with these pastoral responsibilities. They will then carry them out joyfully and confidently, as well as effectively. I give thanks with you for *the witness to fidelity of your priests*.

Please assure all of them of my spiritual closeness and encouragement in their generous commitment. The Pope prays every day that the Church will not lack the gift of priesthood and that seminarians may be fully aware of the marvellous gift that the Lord has given them by calling them to his service. As I entrust them all to the motherly intercession of the Virgin Mary, I assure you of my pastoral concern for your diocesan Churches. I cordially impart to you all an affectionate Apostolic Blessing, which I extend to the priests, deacons, consecrated persons and all the lay faithful of your Dioceses.