



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Friday, 10 June 1988

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1. I extend a warm and fraternal greeting to all of you, Pastors of the local Churches in the Provinces of Baltimore, Washington, Atlanta and Miami.

It is a pleasure to note the presence of Archbishop Hickey in anticipation of the Consistory in which he will be created a Cardinal. In Archbishop Borders I greet the first See of Baltimore as it prepares to celebrate next year its bicentennial, with profound significance for the whole Church in the United States. With particular fraternal affection I send greetings to Archbishop Marino of Atlanta, the first black Archbishop in the United States, who will be arriving soon to receive the Pallium. With gratitude I reciprocate the cordial welcome given me by Archbishop McCarthy on my arrival in Miami. And to all of you, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I express my esteem and solidarity in Christ Jesus.

I recently spoke to the Bishops of Region V about the call to conversion, and on this occasion I would like to speak to you about *the call to prayer*.

We have all meditated on the words of Jesus: "Pray constantly for the strength... to stand secure before the Son of Man". And today we accept once again the call to prayer as it comes to each of us and to the whole Church from Christ himself. *The call to prayer places all the Church's activity in perspective*. In 1976, in addressing the Call to Action meeting in Detroit, Paul VI stated that "in the tradition of the Church any call to action is first of all a call to prayer". These words are indeed more relevant today than ever before. They are a challenge to the Church in the United States and

throughout the world.

2. The universal Church of Christ, and therefore each particular Church, *exists in order to pray*. In prayer the human person expresses his or her nature; the community expresses its vocation; the Church reaches out to God. In prayer the Church attains fellowship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (Cfr. 1 *Io* 1, 3). In prayer the Church expresses her Trinitarian life because she directs herself to the Father, undergoes the action of the Holy Spirit and lives fully her relationship with Christ. Indeed *she experiences herself* as the Body of Christ, as the mystical Christ.

The Church meets Christ in prayer at the core of her being. It is in this way that she finds the complete relevance of his teaching and takes on his mentality. By fostering *an interpersonal relationship with Christ*, the Church actualizes to the full the personal dignity of her members. In prayer the Church concentrates on Christ; she possesses him, savours his friendship and is therefore in a position to communicate him. Without prayer all this would be lacking and she would have nothing to offer to the world. But by exercising faith, hope and charity in prayer, her power to *communicate Christ* is reinforced.

3. Prayer is *the goal of all catechesis*, in the Church, because it is a means of union with God. Through prayer the Church expresses the supremacy of God and fulfils the first and greatest commandment of love.

Everything human is profoundly affected by prayer. *Human work is revolutionized by prayer*, uplifted to its highest level. Prayer is the source of the full humanization of work. In prayer the value of work is understood, for we grasp the fact that we are truly collaborators of God in the transformation and elevation of the world. Prayer is the consecration of this collaboration. At the same time it is means through which we face the problems of life and in which all pastoral endeavours are conceived and nurtured.

The call to prayer must precede the call to action, but the call to action must truly accompany the call to prayer. *The Church finds in prayer the root of all her social action* – the power to motivate it and the power to sustain it. In prayer we discover the needs of our brothers and sisters and make them our own, because in prayer we discover that their needs are the needs of Christ. *All social consciousness is nurtured and evaluated in prayer*. In the words of Jesus, justice and mercy are among “the weightier matters of the law” (*Matth.* 23, 23). The Church’s struggle for justice and her pursuit of mercy will succeed only if the Holy Spirit gives her the gift of perseverance in attaining them. This gift must be sought in prayer.

4. In prayer we come to *understand the Beatitudes* and the reasons why we must live them. Only through prayer can we begin to see all the aspirations of humanity from the perspective of Christ. Without the intuitions of prayer we would never grasp *all the dimensions of human development* and the urgency for the Christian community to commit itself to this work.

Prayer calls us to examine our consciences on all the issues that affect humanity. It calls us to ponder our personal and collective responsibility before the judgment of God and in the light of human solidarity. Hence prayer is able to transform the world. Everything is new with prayer, both for individuals and communities. *New goals and new ideals emerge*. Christian dignity and action are reaffirmed. The commitments of our Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders take on new urgency. The horizons of conjugal love and of the mission of the family are vastly extended in prayer.

Christian sensitivity depends on prayer. Prayer is an essential condition – even if not the only one – *for a correct reading of the “signs of the times”*. Without prayer deception is inevitable in a matter of such importance.

5. *Decisions require prayer*; decisions of magnitude require sustained prayer. Jesus himself gives us the example. Before calling his disciples, and selecting the Twelve, Jesus passed the night, on the mountain, in communion with his Father. For Jesus, prayer to his Father meant not only light and strength. It also meant confidence, trust and joy. His human nature exulted in the joy that came to him in prayer. The measure of the Church’s joy in any age is in proportion to her prayer.

The gauge of her strength and the condition for her confidence are fidelity to prayer. The mysteries of Christ are disclosed to those who approach him in prayer. The full application of the Second Vatican Council will forever be conditioned by perseverance in prayer. The great strides made by the laity of the Church in realizing how much they belong to the Church – how much they are the Church – can only be explained in the last analysis by grace and its acceptance in prayer.

6. In the life of the Church today we frequently perceive that *the gift of prayer is linked to the word of God*. A renewal in discovering the Sacred Scriptures has brought forth the fruits of prayer. God’s word, embraced and meditated on, has the power to bring human hearts into ever greater communion with the Most Holy Trinity. Over and over again this has taken place in the Church in our day. The benefits received through prayer linked to the word of God call forth in all of us a further response of prayer – the prayer of praise and thanksgiving.

The word of God generates prayer in the whole community. At the same time it is in prayer that the word of God is understood, applied and lived. For all of us who are ministers of the Gospel, with the pastoral responsibility of announcing the message in season and out of season and of scrutinizing the reality of daily life in the light of God’s holy word, prayer is the context in which we prepare the proclamation of faith. All evangelization is prepared in prayer; in prayer it is first applied to ourselves; in prayer it is then offered to the world.

7. Each local Church is true to itself to the extent that it is *a praying community* with all the consequent dynamism that prayer stirs up within it. The universal Church is never more herself than when she faithfully reflects the image of the praying Christ: the Son who in prayer directs his

whole being to his Father and consecrates himself for the sake of his brethren “that they may be consecrated in truth” (*Io.* 17, 19).

For this reason, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I wish to encourage you in all your efforts to teach people to pray. It is part of the apostolic Church to transmit the teaching of Jesus to each generation, to offer faithfully to each local Church the response of Jesus to the request: “Teach us to pray” (*Luc.* 11, 1). I assure you of my solidarity and of the solidarity of the whole Church in your efforts to *preach the importance of daily prayer and to give the example of prayer*. From the words of Jesus we know that where two or three are gathered in his name, there he is in their midst (Cfr. *Matth.* 18, 20). And we know that in every local Church gathered in prayer around a Bishop there dwells the incomparable beauty of the whole Catholic Church as the faithful image of the praying Christ.

8. In his role as Pastor of the universal Church, the Successor of Peter is called to live a *communion of prayer* with his brother Bishops and their dioceses. Hence all your pastoral initiatives to promote prayer have my full support. In fraternal and pastoral charity I am close to you as you call your people to daily prayer, as you invite them to discover in prayer their dignity as Christians. *Every diocesan and parish initiative* aimed at furthering individual and family prayer is a blessing for the universal Church. Every group that gathers together to pray the Rosary is a gift to the cause of God’s Kingdom. Yes, wherever two or three are gathered in Christ’s name, there he is.

Contemplative communities are a special gift of Christ’s love to his people. They need and deserve the full measure of our pastoral love and support. Their particular role in the world is to bear witness to the supremacy of God and the primacy of Christ’s love “which surpasses all knowledge” (*Eph.* 3, 19).

When, as Bishops, we exercise *our apostolic responsibility to call our people to prayer*, we also deeply fulfill our own pastoral ministry. Not everyone is willing to respond, but millions of people are. And the Holy Spirit is willing to use the Bishops of the Church as instruments in a work that by reason of its supreme delicateness belongs to him alone as the *Dextrae Dei Digitus*. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit can totally renew the Church today through the gift of prayer. We must aspire to possess this gift – so much linked to God’s love; we must invoke it for the Church here and now, and see it also as *the hallmark of the Church of the Millennium*. This is the vital context in which, as Pastors, we must call the Church to prayer. Here too we touch upon *the identity of the Bishop as a sign of Christ*, “a sign of the praying Christ, a sign of the Christ who speaks to his Father, saying: “I offer you praise, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth” (*Luc.* 10, 21) ” (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Ad quosdam episcopos e Civitatibus Foederatis Americae Septemtrionalis occasione oblata 'ad limina' visitationis coram admissos*, 2, die 3 dec. 1983: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VI, 2 (1983) 1234) .

9. Prayer reaches a level of special dignity and efficacy for the community in *the Sacred Liturgy of the Church* and particularly in *Eucharistic worship*, which is the source and summit of Christian living. In this regard the Eucharistic celebration of the Sunday is of immense importance for your local Churches and for their vitality. Five years ago, in speaking at some length about this matter I mentioned that “Throughout the United States there has been a superb history of Eucharistic participation by the people, and for this we must all thank God” (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Ad quosdam episcopos e Civitatibus Foederatis Americae Septmtrionalis occasione oblata 'ad limina' visitationis coram admissos*, 1, die 9 iul. 1983: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VI, 2 (1983) 46. The time is ripe to renew gratitude to God for this great gift and to reinforce this splendid tradition of American Catholics. On that occasion I also mentioned: “All the striving of the laity to consecrate the secular field of activity to God finds inspiration and magnificent confirmation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice. Participating in the Eucharist is only a small portion of the laity’s week, but the total effectiveness of their lives and all Christian renewal depends on it: the primary and indispensable source of the true Christian spirit!” (*Ibid.*, 5: *loc. cit.*, p. 48).

In the Sunday Eucharistic assembly the Father repeatedly glorifies the Resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ by accepting his Sacrifice offered for the whole Church. He confirms the paschal character of the Church. The hour of Sunday Eucharistic worship is a powerful expression of the Christocentric nature of the community, which Christ offers to his Father as a gift. And as he offers his Church to his Father, Christ himself convokes his Church for her mission: her mission, above all of love and praise, to be able to say: “By your gift I will utter praise in the vast assembly” (*Ps.* 23 (22), 26).

At the same time that the Church is summoned to praise, she is summoned to service in fraternal charity and in justice, mercy and peace. In the very act of convoking his Church to service, Christ consecrates this service, renders it fruitful and offers it in the Spirit to his Father. This service to which the Church is called is the service of evangelization and human advancement in all their vital aspects. It is *service in the name of Christ* and of his mercy, in the name of him who said: “My heart is moved with pity for the crowd” (*Matth.* 15, 32).

10. There are many other aspects of prayer, both private and liturgical, that deserve reflection. There are many other dimensions of the call to prayer that the Church would like to emphasize. I wish at this time, however, to allude only to *two realities* which the Church must constantly face and which she can face adequately only in prayer. They are *suffering and sin*.

It is in her prayer that the Church understands and copes with suffering: she reacts to it as Jesus did in the Garden: “In his anguish he prayed with all the greater intensity” (*Luc.* 22, 44). Before the mystery of suffering, the Church is still unable to modify the advice of Saint James or to improve on it: “Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray” (*Iac.* 15, 13). Combined with all her efforts to alleviate human suffering – which she must multiply until the end of time – *the Church’s definitive response to suffering is found only in prayer*.

The other reality to which the Church responds in prayer is sin. In prayer the Church braces herself to engage in paschal conflict with sin and with the devil. In prayer she asks pardon for sin; in prayer she implores mercy for sinners; and in prayer she extols the power of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The Church's response to sin is to praise salvation and the superabundance of the grace of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. "To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his own blood... be glory and power forever and ever!" (*Apoc.* 1, 5-6).

Profoundly convinced of the power of prayer and humbly committed to it in our own lives, let us, dear Brothers, confidently *proclaim throughout the Church the call to prayer*. At stake is the Church's need to be herself, the Church of prayer, for the glory of the Father. The Holy Spirit will assist us and the merits of Christ's Paschal Mystery will supply for our human weaknesses.

The example of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, as a model of prayer, is a source of confidence and trust for all of us. As we ourselves look to her, we know that her example sustains our clergy, Religious and laity. We know that her generosity is a legacy for the whole Church to proclaim and imitate.

Finally, in the words of Paul, I ask you all: "Pray for me that God may put his word on my lips, that I may courageously make known the mystery of the Gospel... Pray that I may have courage to proclaim it as I ought... Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with unfailing love" (*Eph.* 6, 19-20. 24).

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