



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**

Saturday, 5 March 1988

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1. With this visit there begins the 1988 series of the *ad limina* visits of the American Bishops. Today I am very pleased to welcome all of you who make up the first group and who come from the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Dubuque, Kansas City, Omaha and Saint Louis. You represent a great cross-section of the Catholic people of the United States, bringing with you, as you do, *the hopes and aspirations, the joys and difficulties of so many people* – individuals, families and entire particular Churches within the States of Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska and Missouri.

For all of us this is *an hour of ecclesial communion* that follows closely upon my second visit to the United States and especially our important meeting in Los Angeles. There is, moreover, a continuity between this present series of *ad limina* visits and that of 1983, which in turn was in continuity with my first [visit to America in 1979](#). All of these encounters are likewise linked to the future of the Church in the United States, which I hope to be able to reflect on again next year in a meeting with American Bishops.

2. Because this present hour is one of ecclesial communion it is linked to *our own salvation*. The Church began her Lenten celebration proclaiming with Saint Paul: "Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!" (2 Cor. 6, 2). Like all the other members of the Church *we ourselves must approach our salvation in faith* – faith in the mystery of Jesus Christ and his Church. As Bishops we put this faith into practice by actuating the mystery of our own hierarchical communion in the Church. *By living this mystery of communion today, we are giving the response of faith to Christ* as he holds up before us his design of unity for his Church and for all who make up the

College of Bishops.

On this occasion, you and I, united in ecclesial communion as pastors of individual dioceses in America and as the Pastor of the universal Church respectively, have the task of offering to Jesus Christ, the Supreme Shepherd of the entire flock, the *Church in the United States*. This Church belongs to Jesus Christ by right. He loves her intensely and intends to possess her ever more fully and to purify her ever more deeply in every aspect of her ecclesial reality.

3. I wish to express once again sentiments of *profound* gratitude and satisfaction at having been able *to visit for a second time the Church in the United States* and to have experienced so many aspects of her life. Coupled with these sentiments are also those of admiration for everything that the grace of Christ has accomplished in the lives of God's people in your land. *The ecclesial reality in the United States is an expression of the power of Christ's Paschal Mystery at work* in the lives of countless individuals and numerous communities. Over and over again this ecclesial reality deserves our prayerful reflection.

During the course of my September visit to nine dioceses I was able to experience the life of faith which is lived in all 186 dioceses throughout the United States, which include twelve Eastern Rite dioceses and the Military Ordinariate. What was especially gratifying was to meet all *the various categories* that make up the one People of God: Bishops, priests, deacons, Religious, seminarians and Religious in formation, and the Catholic laity. All of these categories were present not only in special encounters arranged for me but in the large liturgical celebrations held in each diocese. Repeatedly *I witnessed the faith* of a Church that could address herself to God in the words of the Psalm: "I will give you thanks in the vast assembly; in the mighty throng I will praise you" (*Ps.* 35 (34), 18). And again: "I will give thanks to the Lord with all my heart in the company and assembly of the just. Great are the works of the Lord exquisite in all their delights" (*Ps.* 111 (110), 1-2).

In every event in which I took part, the local Bishop was at my side. *Together we experienced the Church* as she is incarnate in the historical, geographical, social, economic, political and religious context of the United States of America. I saw. I listened. I was addressed. I spoke. And the Church prayed – Christ prayed in his Body, in us, the Church. And all of us entered into closer communion with each other and with him, the Supreme Shepherd.

4. My particular role throughout the whole visit was *to proclaim Jesus Christ* as the Son of God and the Redeemer of man – every man, woman and child. At the same time I came to America in order *to ask everyone to meet Jesus Christ and to give him the response of faith*: to believe in his name, to accept his word, to be open to his love and the love of his Father and the Holy Spirit.

At the basis of all my exhortations to fraternal solidarity and love was that pivotal truth proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council: "By his Incarnation the Son of God united himself in a certain way with each human being" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). The Incarnation as the expression of God's love

is the new foundation of human dignity for everyone. Hence I could not speak of God's love without speaking of human dignity and what it requires. And so at the very beginning of my visit in Miami I stated: "I come to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all who freely choose to listen to me; to tell again the story of God's love in the world; to spell out once more the message of human dignity with its inalienable human rights and its inevitable human duties" (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Prima salutatio ad cives Civitatum Foederatarum Americae Septemtrionalis in aeronavium portu urbis "Miami"*, 2, die 10 sept. 1987: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, X, 3 (1987) 357).

5. All of us were in fact able to perceive a *great response of faith*, in so many ways, on the part of the people – everything being accomplished by the Lord, in accordance with the words of the Psalm: "Come! behold the deeds of the Lord, the astounding things he has wrought..." (*Ps.* 46 845), 9). This response of faith was evident in the wonderful collaboration and hard work of preparation for my visit, in the understanding and acceptance of my role as the Successor of the Apostle Peter, in an openness to the proclamation of the Gospel message, and in our common worship. In so many ways the people expressed their faith in the Church as she exists by the will of Christ: both particular and universal.

One of the great riches of the Church in the United States is *the way in which she herself incarnates universality or catholicity* in her ethnic make-up, taken as she is "from every nation and race, people and tongue" (*Apoc.* 7, 9). The Church in the United States has the advantage of being naturally disposed to live catholicity and to show solidarity with all those particular Churches where her people came from originally. The ethnic contributions to the various liturgies celebrated during my visit were not mere folkloric expressions; they were rather keys opening the door to a fuller understanding of the ecclesial reality of the Church in the United States.

In witnessing aspect after aspect of the Church in your land, I was conscious in each diocese of the mystery of the universal Church as she subsists in particular Churches that joyfully make their pilgrimage of faith, amidst obstacles and opposition, to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The ecclesial reality presented to me in each diocesan community was a portion of Christ's flock, invested with his Spirit – as poured out through the Paschal Mystery – and living by that same Spirit. It was *the Church of Christ living the mystery of Redemption* in the modern world, being herself continually purified after her immersion into the bath of regeneration (Cfr. *Eph.* 5, 26).

6. As the Church in the United States works to be faithful to her task of actuating the Kingdom of God in its initial stage, she strives earnestly to meet pastoral challenges all around her, the fundamental one of which is *to be constantly converted or renewed in God's love*. Being convinced of the openness of the Church in the United States to challenge, of her good will, and, above all, of Christ's grace active within her, I too challenged her in various ways, including setting before her the need to be open to renewal by God himself.

In effect, being renewed in God's love has *very concrete requirements* for the whole Church, and hence for the Church in the United States. It means that she must live to the full *her vocation to holiness*. In the world she must be herself; she must always be what she is meant to be. the holy Body of Christ. In Chapter Five of "[Lumen Gentium](#)" the Church has given to all her sons and daughters a great gift in clearly enunciating the universal call to holiness: "All Christ's followers therefore are invited and bound to pursue holiness and the perfect fulfillment of their proper state". The application of this principle to married couples, Christian parents, widowed and single people is of extreme importance. The Church is truly the sacrament of holiness for everyone. The Council insisted "that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity".

How important it was for the whole Church that the Council should so strongly present this challenge to the laity! Without this principle the full participation of the laity in the life and mission of the Church could never have been ensured. The universal call to holiness was also at the basis of the recent Synod of Bishops on the Laity.

Specific consequences of this principle have been spelled out in the Pastoral Constitution "[Gaudium et Spes](#)", which does not admit "false opposition between professional and social activities on the one part, and religious life on the other" and which tells us that the "split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age" ([Gaudium et Spes](#), 43).

7. As the Church in all her own members endeavours to live her vocation of holiness, she is also mindful of her obligation *to help all people to discover in Christ's Redemption the full meaning of life* in this world. This is another great challenge for the Church. At the beginning of my Pontificate I expressed it in my first Encyclical, saying: "The Church's fundamental action in every age and particularly in ours is to awareness and experience of the whole of humanity towards the mystery of Christ, to help all people to be familiar with the profundity of the Redemption taking place in Christ Jesus" (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Redemptor Hominis*, 10).

This challenge to help all people to be open to the Redemption is linked with *the Church's missionary activity* and therefore with her own *missionary nature*. The Church in the United States – like the universal Church – must be committed to this cause today and forever. During my visit to Phoenix I had the opportunity to touch upon this vital aspect of the Church's life, citing also the American Bishops' 1986 Pastoral Statement on World Mission. The question that I asked in Phoenix still requires further answers from the Church both in the United States and throughout the world: "Who will respond to God's missionary call at the end of the twentieth century?".

8. To bring the fullness of God's word to people, to point their gaze to the mystery of Christ, to help them to understand human dignity and the meaning of life through the key of the Redemption is the supreme service of the Church to humanity. The Church renders this service in the name of

Christ and through the power of his Spirit. At the same time she knows that, in consequence of the principle of the Incarnation – Christ’s union with every human being – she must constantly link with her missionary activity and all her work of evangelization a vast program to help meet other human needs. She is vitally interested in making her specific contribution to uplifting humanity to the level that corresponds to the rightful dignity already granted to it in the mystery of the Word made flesh.

The Church finds in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, the principle of her solicitude for humanity, for the future of humanity on earth and for the whole of development and progress. All of the Church’s motives are inspired by the Gospel of Christ.

The mission of solidarity, to which I have dedicated my latest Encyclical and on which there will be further opportunities for reflection, represents a specially grave responsibility for the Church today. During my visit to the United States I was able to see with what seriousness the local Churches have responded to the needs of their brothers and sisters, with what generosity they have striven to alleviate suffering and pain, with what alacrity they have shown their solidarity with humanity. Not only do I recall the panorama of charitable works and health care that was presented to me in San Antonio and Phoenix, and also efforts of many of your local Churches to respond to the farm crisis, but I know the commitment of all the People of God in America to carry out their vocation of Christian service.

This challenge of service, with its motivation in Christ and his Gospel, must accompany the Church in the United States during the whole length of her pilgrimage of faith. Acceptance of this challenge is extremely pleasing to God; failure to do so is fatal. The Second Vatican Council reminds us: “The Christian who neglects his temporal duties neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation”.

These and other challenges, dear Brothers, stand before the Church of God in the United States – a beloved Church living in the power of Christ’s Spirit and called to ever greater holiness of life, especially during this Marian Year of grace. As you rise up humbly with your people to meet these challenges, you have every reason to be filled with hope. In all your efforts to live worthily the mystery of the Church, you are supported by the prayers of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who, “as a sign of sure hope and solace”, accompanies you on your pilgrimage of faith toward the final goal of eternal life in Christ Jesus. As you make your pilgrim way along this path, I ask you to take deep encouragement from the words of the Prophet: “The Lord God is in your midst, a mighty savior; he will rejoice over you with gladness and renew you in his love”.

In this love I send my Apostolic Blessing to all your local Churches, being especially mindful of all those who bear the Cross of Christ in pain and suffering.

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