



The Holy See

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

Saturday 28 May, 1988

Dear brother Bishops,

1. We have just brought to completion the Church's annual celebration of the great mysteries of Redemption: Christ's Death and Resurrection, his Ascension into heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It is with joy that I welcome you for your *ad limina* visit at a time when the celebration of these great mysteries of faith is still so vivid in our minds and hearts.

Pentecost, in particular, reminds us that the Church, even after two millennia, is always young through the working of the Holy Spirit. It was, in part, to enhance awareness of this fact that my predecessor Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council. His prayer was that the *wonders of the Holy Spirit* would be renewed in our day as in a new Pentecost. If we consider the Church's long history with the eyes of faith, we can find ample confirmation that the wonders of the Holy Spirit are indeed *renewed in every age*, notwithstanding the obstacles that human sinfulness and weakness impose. In the words of the Council, "Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling... Christ summons the Church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that continual reformation of which she always has need, insofar as she is a human and earthly institution" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 6). We must add that the Church's fidelity to her calling means *fidelity to a living person*: Jesus Christ. Through him, her bridegroom and Lord, she enters into communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

2. For us Bishops, our relationship to God, or more precisely our communion with the Most Blessed Trinity, is obviously not just an individual experience for our own benefit. Rather, as a gift received in Baptism and sealed by the Spirit in a new way at our Episcopal ordination, this

relationship becomes the very source of our ministry to God's people. A Bishop's role in his local Church and in the universal communion of faith is not without an intimate and dynamic relationship to his personal commitment to God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

As the Council reminds us: "It pleased God to sanctify and save human beings not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him in truth and serve him in holiness" (*Lumen Gentium*, 9). According to Saint Paul, together we form the one body of Christ (Cfr. 1 *Cor.* 12, 27), with all that this implies for our relationship with God and with one another, and for the mission we have received through Baptism and Holy Orders. It is within the context of this mystery of ecclesial communion that I wish to reflect briefly with you on some aspects of the Church's life in Australia.

3. The communal dimension of the Church's existence is vividly illustrated by her *worship and sacramental life*. The renewal envisioned by the Council included the earnest desire that all the faithful should be led to "full, conscious and active participation" in the liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 14), and that they should "eagerly frequent those sacraments which were instituted to nourish the Christian life" (*Ibid.* 59). I rejoice with you that *liturgical renewal* has indeed led to a more active participation in the Church's worship, and to a new awareness that full participation means actively sharing in the Church's mission in daily life.

At the same time we recognize that changes in the Church as well as the increased secularization of society have been the occasion for some to absent themselves from her sacramental life, particularly the Sunday Eucharist. This phenomenon is not confined to Australia, but I know that this does not lessen your concern that the proportion of Catholics in your country who regularly attend Sunday Mass has been in decline, despite the apparent stability of Mass attendance due to increases in the Catholic population. This is a trend that wounds the very heart of ecclesial communion, for as the Council teaches: "The goal of apostolic endeavour is that all who are made children of God by faith and Baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of his Church, to take part in the Sacrifice and to eat the Lord's Supper" (*Ibid.* 10).

4. One of the outstanding features of the Church in Australia has been the striking witness of the Catholic people's fidelity to Sunday worship. Your pioneer bishops and clergy instilled into them the truth that "*it is the Mass that matters*". People overcame the difficulties of distance and climate in order to participate in the Eucharist. They did so *in imitation of their priests*, whose self-sacrifice in bringing the Mass to them was in many instances nothing short of heroic. I wish to commend you and your clergy for your fidelity to this tradition and for your efforts to bring the sacraments to God's people. I would also urge you to consider ways to *restore an awareness* of the supreme value of participation in the Eucharist among those who have given up Sunday worship.

As a help to us in fulfilling this task, the documents of the Council provide the necessary orientation. They constitute a rich source of inspiration and reflection for all who seek to deepen

their appreciation of worship and participation in the liturgy. For the Council Fathers, liturgy is a foretaste of heaven, it is the sacred action par excellence, in which God is glorified and we are made holy. It contributes to our interior formation and gives rise to an authentic Christian spirit, and is therefore of the greatest importance for the spiritual life. The liturgy animates our search for unity and our practice of charity. It is indeed “the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows” (*Sacrosantum Concilium*, 10) Far from being only an obligation, participation in the Eucharist is an actualization and strengthening of all that is most sacred and most vital in Christian life. People need to be reminded of the immense spiritual riches that sharing in the Eucharist brings to them as members of a royal priesthood.

5. The most effective means of imparting this conciliar teaching is the witness of pastors whose own lives radiate a love and reverence for the liturgy, a love and reverence based on a profound understanding of the sacred mysteries, especially the Eucharist. *Sound catechesis* is also of capital importance for full participation in the sacraments. Catechesis concerning the significance and necessity of Sunday worship must be imparted both *in the home and at school*. Those who are no longer in school, especially young adults, need to be constantly encouraged to receive the sacraments and should always be made welcome by the worshipping community. As I have pointed out in “*Catechesi Traendae*”, “sacramental life is impoverished and very soon turns into hollow ritualism if it is not based on serious knowledge of the meaning of the sacraments, and catechesis becomes intellectualized if it fails to come alive in sacramental practice” (*Catechesi Traendae*, 23).

Catechesis in general, and especially catechesis about the Eucharist, must insist on *the supernatural content of Catholic doctrine*. Otherwise the faith of God’s People risks being reduced to the level of subjective religious feelings, or to a “moralism” detached from a doctrinal foundation. Fidelity to the objective content of faith is basic to the Church’s life and mission, and to defend that content and pass it on to each new generation are among the gravest responsibilities of a Bishop’s teaching and pastoral office. I would encourage you to make this a principal aspect of your ministry.

6. All that I have said about the Eucharist also applies to *the Sacrament of Penance*. On other occasions I have drawn attention to the close link between these two sacraments (*Redemptor Hominis*,²⁰ *et Dominicae Cena*,⁷). The Introduction to the New Order of Penance expresses this very beautifully when it states that “In the Sacrament of Penance... the Father receives the homecoming son, Christ puts the lost sheep on his shoulder and returns it to the sheepfold, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies his temple again or dwells in it more fully. All this is manifested by a renewed and more fervent sharing in the table of Lord where there is great joy in the banquet given by the Church of God for the son returned from afar” (*Ordo Poenitentiae*, Praenotanda, 6 d).

As with the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Penance calls for careful catechesis. An evident appreciation of this sacrament on the part of priests themselves will help the laity to realize the

necessity and value of individual confession and absolution for growth in holiness and as the ordinary way by which a person who is aware of serious sin is reconciled with God and with the Church (Cfr. *Codex Iuris Canonici, can. 960*).

7. I also wish to mention the link between the vitality of sacramental practice and *vocations to the priesthood and religious life*, which are so important for the future of your local Churches. God's gift of priestly and religious vocations is mysteriously *related to the participation of the faithful* in the Eucharistic Sacrifice with reverence and with a worthiness conferred by the Sacrament of Penance. As the chief source of *pastoral charity* (Cfr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 14), the Eucharist not only sustains priests and Religious in a life of faith and selfless love; it also enkindles that pastoral charity in potential priests and Religious, so that they too may serve Christ and his Church in these special vocations. Fostering *love for the sacraments* among the young, especially love for the Eucharist, is an important part of promoting vocations.

We must also pray, since what is at stake is not any human project of our own, but rather *the realization of God's plan* (Cfr. CONGR. PRO CLERICIS *Postquam Apostoli*, die 25 mar. 1980). During his earthly ministry, Jesus recognized that "the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few" (*Luc. 10, 2*). He then revealed our serious responsibility for overcoming the imbalance between the needs of God's people and the number of apostolic labourers when he commanded us to "pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (*Ibid*). Here too, the *fervour of our prayer* for vocations is intimately linked to our love and understanding of the sacraments.

At the same time the local Churches, as well as religious communities, must be energetic in undertaking the *research, planning and organization* necessary for the promotion of vocations. The quality and number of personnel and resources allotted to this work are not only a measure of the priority given to this challenge, but also a testimony to the firm conviction of the various dioceses and religious communities that *God's generosity* will not be lacking to support our human endeavours. We must constantly renew our trust in the immense power of Christ's Paschal Mystery to raise up and sustain new vocations in the Church.

Dear Brothers, as Australia celebrates her Bicentenary, you and your people are called to reflect on the contribution which the Church has made and is making to your national life and history. It was my special joy to witness this contribution at first hand during my pastoral visit. Together with you, I pray that the people of Australia will not fail to build a society based on *the love and worship of Almighty God*. May Catholics always be a shining example of this to their brothers and sisters! In this year dedicated to Mary, Mother of Christ and Mother of his Church, I commend you and your clergy and people to her loving intercession, and I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana