



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE
OF BANGLADESH ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Friday, 11 March 1994

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. I give thanks to God always for you - the *Bishops of Bangladesh* and the People of God entrusted to your pastoral care - "remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 1:2-3). I still recall with deep gratitude my Pastoral Visit eight years ago when I came "as a pilgrim to the 'soul' of the Bangladeshi people" (John Paul II, *Address at the International Airport of Dacca (Bangladesh)*, 2, [19 Nov. 1986]). You are "a little flock", but you are strong in the Lord (cf. Ps.46 (45), 1), and on your account I take great comfort. I pray that this "ad Limina" visit will further strengthen the bonds of unity, charity and peace, which link the Church in Bangladesh to this Apostolic See. Through the Petrine Ministry, which is essentially related to every particular Church, the Bishop of Rome offers you his support, confirming you in the fulfilment of your pastoral duty of building up the one Body of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:12).

2. Because Pastors share in the fullness of the Priesthood of Christ, the Bridegroom of the Church, they too must "give themselves up for her" (*Ibid.*, 5:25). We are servants of the *koinonia*: both in our shared solicitude for the whole Church as members of the Episcopal College (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 23) and in the care of the particular Church where Christ has placed each one of us as the visible sign of unity. *The Bishop stands in a spousal relationship with respect to his community, representing Christ, the divine Spouse*. Like his Lord, the Bishop is to love his People with a totally generous heart, nourish them with the refreshing word of truth and the grace of the Sacraments, and he is to inspire them to "do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3:17).

Our first thoughts on the occasion of your "ad Limina" visit must therefore turn to our own ministry as Successors of the Apostles in the service of the Gospel. The Second Vatican Council reminds all Pastors of their responsibility to be "heralds of the faith who bring new disciples to Christ" (*Lumen Gentium*, 25). This calling can only be rendered fruitful through an interior life invigorated by the love of Christ. Reaping an abundant harvest in the Lord's vineyard depends upon our hearing the word of God with reverence (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 1) and pondering it lovingly in our hearts (cf. Lk., 2:19). This requires time for prayer and that interior serenity which produces true apostles who can be "contemplatives in action". As credible witnesses we will then pass on to others what we have heard with our ears, seen with our eyes, looked upon and touched with our hands: the Word of Life (cf. 1 Jn. 1:1)!

3. In fulfilling your pastoral responsibilities you rightly look to your *brother priests*, your primary co-workers in the sacred ministry. To them goes my encouragement and the assurance of my prayers, knowing the often difficult circumstances of their ministry. Just as Christ called his disciples "friends" (Jn. 15:15), so must a Bishop regard his priests as "sons and friends... ready to listen to them and cultivate an atmosphere of easy familiarity with them, thus facilitating the pastoral work of the entire Diocese" (*Christus Dominus*, 16). On the Bishop's shoulders falls the burden of fostering the sanctification and continuing education of his presbyterate.

The "gift of God" conferred through Ordination needs to be unceasingly "rekindled" (cf. 2 Tim. 1:6). The "burning wick" must not be quenched (Is. 42:3). Through the dynamism of his grace, the Holy Spirit is ever calling priests to conversion of life, fervent prayer and pastoral charity. The Bishop "is responsible for their ongoing formation, the purpose of which is to ensure that all his priests are generously faithful to the gift and ministry received, that they are priests such as the People of God wishes to have and has a 'right' to" (John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 79). I encourage you to work together to establish a systematic and comprehensive programme of priestly formation, both in your seminaries and for priests who have already spent some years in the active ministry.

Likewise, *the consecrated life needs your support*, especially as religious institutes seek to improve the spiritual and intellectual formation of their members. Religious are a very great part of the life of the Church in Bangladesh: their consecration is a powerful sign of God's kingdom at work in the lives of your people and their apostolate is the fruitful source of so much good. I am sure that you will continue to encourage Religious to reflect on ways of increasing the number of suitable candidates. The whole Catholic community is called to an increasing awareness of the christological and ecclesial motivation which lies behind every form of vocation (cf. John Paul II, *Redemptionis Donum*, 3).

4. Only where there is a commitment to serious and prayerful study is it possible for the "one faith" to penetrate the very marrow of the various cultures, especially in Asia, where ancient religious traditions have profoundly moulded people's character and way of life. It is no small challenge for you to oversee the authentic inculturation of the faith among your flocks (cf. John Paul II,

Redemptoris Missio, 55). *Christianity is a stranger to no culture and to no people.* The proclamation of the Gospel ennobles "those things which every individual, people and nation and every culture throughout history recognizes and brings into being as goodness, truth and beauty" (cf. John Paul II, *Slavorum Apostoli, 18*). The Redemptive Incarnation of the Saviour enriches the genuine values of every people, enabling them to bring forth new and abundant fruit.

Vigour and creativity should inspire your work of evangelization, especially in those regions which are more open to receiving the Gospel. In your *Pastoral Plan for the Church in Bangladesh*, you rightly recognize that planning and consultation at all appropriate levels favour communion and service "with" and "for" others. As a small flock of the "company of those who believe", it is particularly important that you should remain "of one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32) and that you should all be moved by a great sense of unity and mutual solidarity. The apparent success of sects in certain parts of your country is already causing you concern. This challenge should stimulate you to spare no efforts in proclaiming the truth of the Gospel, which is "the only fully valid response...to the problems and hopes that life poses to every person and society" (John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici, 34*).

The particular situation of your Nation makes it necessary for those who preach "the truth of the Gospel" (Gal. 2:14) to be familiar with the religious traditions of their fellow-citizens. While humbly but firmly confessing that "there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5), those who evangelize must ever be respectful of the "seeds of the Word" sown among peoples and religions by the Spirit which "blows where it wills" (Jn. 3:8). To discern his presence and activity, not only in individuals but in societies, peoples and cultures, is essential if the Church's proclamation is to bear a rich harvest (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio, 28*). *The future of evangelization and interreligious harmony passes by way of respect, dialogue and co-operation for the common good.*

Religious belief is a source of social peace, and only the perversion of religious sentiment leads to discrimination and conflict. The demands of truth proscribe the use of coercive proselytism and any curtailing of the right to profess personal convictions (John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace 1991, 4* [8 Dec. 1990]). Repression of the right to freedom of religion is to be deplored as an affront to the dignity of the persons involved.

5. Dear Brothers, I deeply share your concern, indeed your profound sorrow, at the poverty which afflicts so many of your fellow citizens. The moral disorder represented by the ever widening gap between wealthy and impoverished nations, but also between the affluent and the poor within countries, calls for a determined response on the part of the Church. "To teach and spread her social doctrine pertains to the Church's evangelizing mission and is an essential part of the Christian message" (John Paul II, *Centessimus Annus, 5*). As your own efforts in this area so clearly testify, the Church has a special love of the poor, neglected, marginalized and suffering, and a particular duty towards them. I am pleased to know that with the Holy See's assistance the

Pope John Paul II Centre has recently been opened in Mugaipar. I pray that this Centre - and all the works of education, health care and social services so generously served by Religious and laity - will be visible and enduring signs of God's universal love for each person, regardless of creed, class or ethnic origin.

6. This *International "Year of the Family"* is a significant step on our path towards the approaching "hour" of the Third Millennium. The Lord is beckoning us to increase our pastoral attention to the "gospel of the family" (cf. John Paul II, *Gratissimam Sane*, 23) and to recognize that the defence and promotion of the dignity of the family are a principal responsibility of our ministry. For the Church in Bangladesh, you are teachers and watchmen of the truth about the family. I am aware that you are already taking initiatives in this "priority sector of pastoral care" (John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 73), and I wish to encourage the whole Church in Bangladesh - Bishops, priests, Religious, catechists and all the lay faithful - to ask themselves in what specific ways they can safeguard and promote the holiness of marriage and the family. I hope that my recently published Letter to Families, when read together with the relevant chapters of "Gaudium et Spes" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 47, 52), "*Humanae Vitae*" and "*Familiaris Consortio*", will serve to guide every level of pastoral planning regarding families.

Among your concerns you will no doubt give special attention to marriage preparation for engaged couples, to associations of families for families, to the youth apostolate and to efforts aimed at ending the "habitual discrimination against women" which is an "inheritance of sin" (John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 14). With particular satisfaction I commend the support you have given to *education in responsible fatherhood and motherhood through natural family planning*. These methods involve a way of living the gift of conjugal fruitfulness which enhances the freedom and responsibility of the spouses, and ensures an unconditional respect for the dignity of the person and the true nature of marriage.

7. My dear brothers, one of the consolations of my ministry to the universal Church is the steadfast and enthusiastic love for Christ which animates the "young" Churches throughout the world. *I am supported by the power of their witness and the fervour of their prayers* (cf. Acts 12:5). With firm confidence that the Church in Bangladesh will experience a "great springtime for Christianity", I entrust all your priests, Religious and laity to the maternal intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. As the "Mother of Fairest Love", she is the "sign" that the Almighty continues to do great things for us; and holy is his name (cf. Lk. 1:49). With my Apostolic Blessing.

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