



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF SRI LANKA ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

Saturday, 24 August 1994

Dear Brother Bishops,

I warmly welcome you, the *Bishops of Sri Lanka*, with the prayer that "mercy, peace and love may be multiplied in you" (cf. Jude 1:2). I earnestly hope that your *ad Limina* visit and your veneration of the holy Martyrs Peter and Paul will strengthen the *koinonia* of heart and mind (cf. Acts 4:32) which unites us in the service of the Gospel. All the joyful moments of my Pastoral Visit to your country last year come back to my mind, There I experienced the serene and dignified hospitality, the fervent religious spirit of all Sri Lankans. I continue to pray that your people will always cherish their rich spiritual and cultural heritage, and that the harmony and mutual respect which has flourished among the various religions will not be weakened by present ethnic difficulties (cf. John Paul II, *Homily for the Liturgy of Vespers at the Cathedral of St. Lucia, Colombo, Sri Lanka*, 20 Jan. 1995).

The whole Church is preparing to celebrate the *Great Jubilee* which will commemorate the "fullness of time", (Gal. 4:4) when the Eternal Word took flesh in the Virgin Mother's womb (cf. Jn. 1:14). This must be a time for the Church in Sri Lanka *to enter the Upper Room with Mary and the Apostles and pray fervently for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit*, a time to open wide the doors to Christ and to listen to his pressing summons: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mk. 1:15). Through you, his "ambassadors" (2 Cor. 5:6), this appeal should ring out with ever greater urgency in the final years before the beginning of the Third Christian Millennium, The framework for this preparation is presented by the positive outcome of the *National Pastoral Convention*, for which we prayed together last year in Colombo. The deliberations and resolutions of the Convention have set the tone of your pastoral agenda for the Third Millennium. May the Lord bring to completion the good work he has begun in you (cf. Phil. 1:6)!

2. The Convention has brought a new awareness among *the laity* of the fact that by virtue of their Baptism and Confirmation they are called to bear faithful witness to Christ in every sphere of life. They have the specific task of serving the Kingdom of God "by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will" (*Lumen Gentium*, 31). They look to you and your priests to help them acquire the preparation they need in order to answer that call. *A systematic and sound catechists* which truly nourishes the seed of faith in people's hearts is central to your prophetic ministry. In Sri Lanka, the celebration of religious feasts, novenas, pilgrimages and other manifestations of popular devotion provide unique opportunities - to be explored in greater depth - for the *deeper spiritual and theological formation of the laity*. The translations of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* into the languages of your country, prepared under your supervision, will be of great help in handing on the treasure of the Gospel to your people.

It is especially important that *the catechetical apostolate should help the family* to fulfil its role as the principal school of evangelization: "Christian parents are the primary and irreplaceable catechists of their children, a task for which they are given the grace by the Sacrament of Matrimony" (John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 34). They must be supported, of course, by priests, religious and catechists, in parishes, schools and associations. The well-organized system of Sunday Schools established in your Dioceses is an excellent means of fulfilling this task, especially where catechists constantly grow in their knowledge of the faith, develop methods of teaching adapted to those being catechized and show zeal in reaching out to those who seem indifferent. To all the committed lay faithful devoted to works of the apostolate in your Dioceses I send a special greeting, and I encourage them "to grow always in the knowledge of the richness of Baptism and faith as well as to live it more fully" (*Ibid.*, 58).

3. In this context a special chapter must be dedicated to young people. The secularization of the educational system and of society calls the ecclesial community to devote more time and resources to the *youth apostolate*. This requires creativity in the designing of programmes, in planning retreats and days of recollection, and in the setting up of Catholic youth federations, movements and associations. In their own specific way each of these initiatives should further that blessed encounter of youth with the loving gaze of Christ (Cf. Mk. 10:21) who knows what is in their heart (cf. Jn. 2:25). Despite allurements of all kinds, *young people yearn for the fullness of life* which is found only in him who is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (*Ibid.*, 14:6). Once young people have found their interior Companion, the Word of life, the Redeemer of the world, they become the most effective apostles to their own generation!

A particular word of gratitude is due for the *work and witness of your Catholic schools*. As well as pursuing excellence in academic matters, education undertaken by the Church aims at leading pupils to a renewal of their minds by the power of truth (cf. Rom. 12:2) and to the conversion of their hearts to the love of God and neighbour (cf. Mt. 22:37-40). By teaching *respect for others and tolerance of diversity*, Catholic schools help to form a climate of dialogue and cooperation in society. In order that the schools may fulfil their lofty mission better, I invite you to encourage

those engaged in this apostolate to persevere in spite of difficulties and to *explore new ways of serving the poor and the marginalized*, who would not otherwise have access to such an education.

4. In all these areas of the apostolate, you are assisted by your generous and dedicated *priests*. Your particular Churches are blessed with priests filled with zeal and marked by the spirit of evangelical poverty. Encourage them always to "strengthen the inner man" (cf. Eph. 3:16) through a life of prayer and the willingness to make a full and sincere gift of self to the Lord and his Church. The Church in Sri Lanka, as everywhere else, needs priests outstanding for their holiness of life, theological learning and spiritual wisdom, devout celebration of the Eucharist and the other Sacraments according to the mind and discipline of the Church, obedience to their Bishops and a commitment to fruitful cooperation with the lay faithful (cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 18). Your recent decision that candidates to the priesthood will have a *propaedeutic year of intense spiritual formation* will undoubtedly reinforce the training of "shepherds after the Lord's own heart" (cf. Jer. 3:15). Be close to priests who suffer or are tempted, reminding them of the sacramental grace which has configured them to Christ who prefers to call them "friends" rather than servants (cf. Jn. 15:15). Exhort your priests to maintain the traditional pastoral practice of *parish visitation* as an effective means of sustaining the faithful and of reaching those who have fallen away from the practice of their faith.

5. You know well - and the recent Synod of Bishops has made it even clearer - that *the consecrated life is a gift of the Father to the ecclesial community*. Within the particular Church consecrated men and women are called to be a leaven of communion. They owe allegiance of mind and heart to the Church's Magisterium, "an allegiance which must be lived honestly and clearly testified to before the People of God by all consecrated persons, especially those involved in theological research, teaching, publication, catechesis and the use of the means of social communication" (John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 46). The witness of ready co-operation between Bishops and consecrated persons, and between the Bishops' Conference and the Conference of Major Superiors, will intensify the shared work of building up the Body of Christ in your nation. Sustained by personal and communal prayer, consecrated persons are called to be present especially in the "frontier areas" of the Church's evangelizing mission, both geographically and sociologically, in the fields of education, social action and the media. "Through you I encourage the consecrated men and women of Sri Lanka "to bear a renewed and vigorous evangelical witness to self-denial and restraint, in a form of fraternal life inspired by principles of simplicity and hospitality" (*Ibid.*, 90). The apostolate of *women religious* should include attention to the promotion of the dignity and vocation of women. It should support and guide women to put their specific gifts and qualities at the service of the Church and of society with ever greater effect.

6. God himself is in "dialogue" with the world, offering it his love, mercy and salvation. In fidelity to this divine initiative and example, *the Church enters into the "dialogue of salvation" with all men and women*, freely and respectfully presenting her message and listening to the wisdom of other

believers. At the present time it is becoming ever clearer that the most fertile ground for interreligious discussions include moral and ethical issues affecting the future of humanity. The universal and unchanging moral norms which derive from the order of creation are "the unshakable foundation and solid guarantee of a just and peaceful human coexistence, and hence of a genuine democracy, which can come into being and develop only on the basis of the equality of all its members, who possess common rights and duties" (John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 96). Interreligious dialogue in Sri Lanka, especially with the majority Buddhist community, can be based on a shared recognition of such values as the inalienable dignity of every human life, the inestimable value of the family, respect for a life of virtue, non-violence, and self-effacement in serving the needs of others. Even though Sri Lankan Catholics are but "a little leaven" (1 Cor. 5:6), the promotion of interreligious dialogue, joint religious witness and effective spiritual solidarity with others constitute an important contribution to building peace and harmony in your country.

Bishops also lead their people in *extending "the right hand of friendship" (Gal. 2:9) to other Christians*. In obedience to Christ's own prayer - "that they may all be one" (Jn. 17:21) - the Church is irrevocably committed to seeking the full, visible unity of all Christ's followers. The ecumenical task "is an organic part of her life and work, and consequently must pervade all that she is and does" (John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, 20). Is it not true that effective evangelization depends to a great extent on *the united witness of all Christians*? Especially significant in this regard are joint efforts to apply Gospel principles to the conduct of social, economic, and political life.

7. Dear Brothers: in considering the Church's mission to the world I cannot pass over in silence the anxiety which you have expressed concerning the hardships and sufferings inflicted upon your people by *the violence which continues to affect your beloved nation and by the terrible atrocities being committed*. The promotion of peace is integral to the Church's mission, and you have on many occasions raised your voices on behalf of this supreme social good. You have constantly proclaimed that ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity is a treasure to be preserved - not an obstacle to be removed. You rightly recognize that differences make possible a true "exchange of gifts", and should serve to strengthen mutual esteem and a willingness to work together for the common good. You have rightly insisted that negotiated settlement is the only way in which the issues at the root of the conflict going on in the North and East of your country can be addressed. Only dialogue can safeguard inviolable human rights, including the legitimate rights of minorities. You have expressed your willingness to mediate, according to the Church's tradition of being ever ready to *provide the impartial atmosphere* in which those who work for peace can meet, free from fear and suspicion. As we implore God's peace upon your beautiful Island, we cannot fail to thank the many Christian organizations and individuals who, throughout the hostilities, have borne effective witness to the "more excellent way" of love which Jesus taught (cf. 1 Cor. 12:31). The swift response of *solidarity* shown to the homeless, refugees and victims of bloodshed is a sign of divine grace at work in your midst. As Pastors sensitive to your peoples' quest for peace with justice, you are well aware that *the Church's social doctrine belongs to the fullness of the Gospel*

message. The Church's contribution to the integral development of Sri Lankan society lies in putting forward a vision in which economic, political and social progress go hand in hand with religious, cultural and moral advancement.

8. Dear Brothers: I give thanks to God for you and for the Church of God now so firmly planted in your country. May Blessed Joseph Vaz, the Apostle of Sri Lanka, who preached the Gospel in the face of difficulties of all kinds, be your model and inspiration! Entrusting you and all the priests, consecrated men and women, and laity to the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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