



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF FRANCE
ON ITS 'AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM' VISIT**

Saturday, 1 February 1997

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. It is now your turn to make your visit *ad limina Apostolorum*, Pastors of the Dioceses of western France, after the Bishops of your country whom I have already received. I naturally recall my recent visit last September to Saint Laurent sur Sèvre in the Diocese of Luçon and to Sainte Anne d'Auray in the Diocese of Vannes. The warm welcome I was given by you and by the faithful of your region, made that early autumn a true sign of the Church's eternal springtime.

I warmly thank Bishop Jacques Fihey of Coutances, your president, for his concise assessment of the pastoral situation in your Western Apostolic Region, which he presented on your behalf. You are welcome in the home of Peter's Successor, in the city where the mandate Christ entrusted to the Prince of the Apostles, who witnessed to the Lord with his blood, continues to be exercised.

2. *The formation of the lay faithful* represents one of the activities frequently mentioned in your reports, with a pastoral orientation that I wish to encourage. The step taken by your Bishop's Conference, which has led to the Letter entitled *Proposer la foi dans la société actuelle*, will provide you with a useful guide for the members of your Dioceses and encourage them to give ever greater consideration to their witness. I would like to devote this meeting to stressing several significant points for the various kinds of formation you are to offer.

Every Christian is continually invited to *deepen his faith*; this will help him to come closer to the risen Christ and to be his witness in society. In fact, in a world where people do not cease to improve their scientific and technical knowledge, knowledge of the faith cannot remain merely the

catechism learned in childhood. To grow humanly and spiritually, the Christian has an obvious need for ongoing formation. Without this, he risks no longer being enlightened in the sometimes difficult choices he must make in his life and in carrying out his specific Christian mission among his brothers and sisters. For as one of the most ancient patristic texts says, “what the soul is to the body, Christians are in the world So noble is the position to which God has assigned them that they are not allowed to desert it” (*Letter to Diognetus*, n. 6).

Thus I encourage all Christ’s disciples to respond to your appeals and to take the time to develop their Christian life and their understanding of the faith. The Christian must be aware of this primary truth: God made man in his image and gave him the power to rule over creation, to put it at his service and to glorify the Creator. In creating him a rational being, he also gave him the possibility of reaching a form of rational knowledge of God, who, in addition, then invites him to follow a journey of faith.

Personal formation primarily offers the faithful an opportunity to *interiorize all the knowledge acquired* to enable them to *unify their existence and their life* around this central core of the person which the Fathers of the Church called the “heart’s heart”; thus, from the depths of their soul they will belong to Christ and develop all the dimensions of their life, especially in their professional work and in social life. For it is every believer’s duty to take part in building up society, putting himself at the service of his brothers and sisters through the search for the common good. By his work, which enables him to meet his needs and those of his family, he also shares in developing and perfecting creation.

By virtue of his Baptism, the Christian is called to be a *fully conscious and active member* of the whole Body of the Church. “In Christ”, St Paul says, “you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph 2:22). And since he bears Christ within himself, he is called to reveal him to his brothers and sisters and to be an apostle, that is, one who has been sent.

3. In the towns and villages of your Dioceses, lay people are taking increasing *responsibilities in ecclesial life*. They are ready to take their part in evangelization; they provide services of catechesis, liturgical leadership and preparation for the sacraments, spiritual assistance to the sick or to prisoners and reflection and activities in many social contexts. To do this in a Gospel spirit, they often ask you to help them acquire the necessary training. In your Dioceses, as Bishop Fihey pointed out in his regional report, many initiatives have been taken: at the diocesan level or even at the level of groups of Dioceses, you organize *formation courses* sometimes lasting several years for persons called to take on responsibilities; it is evident that the lay faithful are thus equipped to fulfil as well as possible the functions you can entrust to them.

At the grass-roots level, *bible groups* or basic *theological formation* is offered to parishioners keen to be Gospel witnesses. I can only invite you to pursue your very positive efforts in this direction with the selflessness of all apostles, for “one sows while another reaps”.

While I am fully aware that this can present problems in each Diocese, I ask you to give *real priority* to the *formation* of certain priests or lay people, as well as religious, who must acquire definite competence and lasting experience in order to be *good formation* personnel themselves. This is an indispensable investment whose fruits will mature over the years. Your region benefits from a Catholic university whose role is essential to formation. In the long run, teachers and researchers should be trained in order to guarantee its continuance and to give an impetus to theology and pastoral care.

4. I do not intend here to devise programmes for the various stages of formation; rather I would like to recall some essential features. It is especially important, when it is a question of persons called to carry out pastoral services, to attend to the balance between teaching and effective involvement in a mission. In short, formation will better achieve its objective if it involves people who actively live their Christianity: *do not isolate the intellectual work required of people from their commitment to the community*, so that they may progress in their sense of Church. In addition, while they are being given the means for theoretical and practical formation, the means for a properly spiritual renewal must be offered, that is, a guided initiation into prayer and times for meditation or retreat.

5. As in any formation or catechetical activity, *Sacred Scripture* must have a privileged place. As the Second Vatican Council recalled in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, Sacred Scripture is the soul of theology (cf. n. 24). St Jerome said: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ" (*Commentary on Isaiah*, Prologue). We know that, when read in the Church, Scripture is the soil in which the tree of the knowledge of God can grow. The People of God cannot hope to live the life of their Master if they do not assimilate the very words which have been passed on to them so that, by believing in Christ, they may have "life in his name" (Jn 20:31). Thorough familiarity with Scripture nourishes the spiritual life and makes in-depth participation in the liturgy possible.

Two millenniums of meditation and reflection on the mystery of Christ have led the Church to a knowledge of the faith which all should acquire. Christians, in order not to let themselves be "tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Eph 4:14), will benefit from a sound *reflection on the Creed*, which does not necessarily mean learned study. In the widespread culture of this age, the image of Christ can be distorted if we neglect to discover its treasures as developed over the course of centuries by the Councils, the Fathers and theologians, without forgetting the spiritual authors. There is nothing of an ungrounded intellectual approach in a properly directed study of the Creed; it gives the faith a structure and contributes to its transmission. This is the spirit in which the Second Vatican Council clearly showed that the Church finds her *raison d'être* in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, revealed by the work of Christ the Redeemer. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was compiled to provide indispensable standards, which your Bishops' Conference, following the example of others in the world, has adopted in accordance with a pedagogy appropriate to your culture.

6. If they are clearly and solidly presented, the gifts of faith will effectively help to make it understood that belonging to Christ implies a rule of life, a law that is liberating rather than constraining. The deep bond that exists between faith and morals escapes many of our contemporaries, who remember only the prohibitions, as a good many of your reports show. The discerning faithful should be enabled firmly *to grasp the positive and vital meaning of the Church's moral teaching*. This is what I felt had to be explained in the Encyclicals *Veritatis splendor* and *Evangelium vitae*, in particular.

Day by day, it is necessary for Catholics to practise *enlightened discernment* regarding the opinions whose influence is spreading and of which they must remain free. Whether it is a question of personal or social morals, a disciple of Christ must be able to recognize where the right way, the truth about man and respect for life truly lie. What is known as the evolution of morality cannot in itself reform norms of life based on the natural law that every person of goodwill can learn with his own right reason, and the Gospel. What civil law authorizes, does not necessarily correspond to the truth of the human vocation, nor to the good which every person must try to accomplish in his personal choices and in his conduct towards others.

All in all, in a cultural context that tends to relativize most convictions, the believer must be devoted to *the search for and the love of the truth*. This is a central principle. The Lord Jesus himself said: "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life" (Jn 14:6), and he promised his disciples the Spirit of truth which "will guide you into all the truth" (Jn 16:13). This means repeating once again that a formation which truly helps one live the Christian life implies intelligent and responsible acceptance of the truth received from God through the Gospel.

7. It is appropriate to recall here that formation is one of the objectives of the *movements* that bring Christians together according to their different goals and support the energy of individuals. Spiritual, apostolic or charitable movements, outreach teams or those providing preparation for the sacraments lead their members to dedicate themselves to serving those brothers and sisters who practise occasionally, or persons who are far from the Church. They can be the best at relaying the Christian message in contexts where the Gospel is still unknown or distorted, by their witness of faith and the concrete love of their neighbour.

You have informed me of the current development of the *catechumenate* for young people and adults in your Dioceses. This is naturally a privileged place of formation for men and women who aspire to discover faith in the Church. With you, I congratulate the many Christians who guide the catechumens and neophytes on their journey.

Further extending my talk, I would also like to encourage the faithful who work in the media, *whether Christian or not*, at the national or local level to inform their many readers or listeners about the meaning of their life and of events. Social communication in communities requires well-trained spokesmen, who in turn are able to contribute positively to the formation of those who hear

them.

8. From another viewpoint, I would also like to recall that pastoral action must be attentive to the different *states of life* which the faithful can choose and which all have great value. Lived in fidelity to their initial choice, they are an eminent way to profess one's faith, for they show that in moments of joy as in those which are difficult, life with Christ is the way to happiness. This is the case with those who are committed to the priesthood, to the diaconate or to the consecrated life, which I have already discussed with the Bishops of another Apostolic Region.

Those who live in *marriage* are the privileged witnesses to God's covenant with his people. Through this sacrament, their human love takes on an infinite value, for spouses make the Father's love present in a particular way, and receive an important responsibility in the world: to bring forth children who are called to be children of God, and to help them in their human and spiritual growth. In our contemporary world, human love is often held up to ridicule. Pastors and couples committed to the Church will be particularly anxious to deepen the theology of the sacrament of marriage, in order to help young married couples and families in difficulty to recognize better the value of their commitment and to receive the grace of their covenant. I invite married lay people to witness to the greatness of married and family life based on commitment and fidelity. Only a total gift makes one completely free to love truly, not merely according to the emotional side of one's being, but with the deepest part of oneself, to achieve the union of hearts and bodies, a source of profound joy and an image of man's union with God, to which we are all called.

I have not forgotten those who have been unable to achieve a plan of life of this kind. If their *celibacy* was not chosen, this can make them feel that their life is partly a failure. May they not lose heart, for Christ never abandons those who trust in him! They can dedicate themselves to others and to developing fulfilling fraternal relations. They are examples for many. They have their full place in the ecclesial community. In every state, a life of giving is a source of joy.

9. During my recent visit to France, I said that I appreciated the Church's vitality in your country, despite the difficulties she encounters. I am convinced that your initiatives in the areas of the formation of the faithful, as well as your concern to help each person to fulfil himself in the community and to give witness in society will bear fruit in this time of renewal as we approach the Great Jubilee.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, through you, the members of your Dioceses are present here. In the year of the centenary of the death of St Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, we commend your persons, your ministry and all the faithful of your Apostolic Region to her intercession. With all of them in mind, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you.

