



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO FRENCH BISHOPS
DURING THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT**

Saturday, 11 January 1997

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. A few months after my last Pastoral Visit to France, which I vividly recall, today I am pleased to begin the conversations I will be having with the Bishops of the different apostolic regions on the occasion of their pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles, the principal meaning of the ad limina visit. Your meetings with the Successor of Peter and his assistants are an act of ecclesial communion and an expression of the collegial spirit that unites us. These contacts are also the opportunity for deeper reflection on the various aspects of your mission.

I thank Bishop Michel Moutel of Nevers, President of the Central Apostolic Region, for the affectionate sentiments he has just expressed to me on your behalf and for his outline of the Church's situation in your country. I cordially greet each one of you and, in particular, Archbishop Jean Honoré of Tours, who welcomed me to his see city with so much attention last September, making my pilgrimage to the tomb of St Martin an important moment that I could not possibly forget as I meet you again here.

Today we pay tribute to Bishop Jean Cuminal of Blois, who left us prematurely before he could celebrate the third centenary of the foundation of his Diocese. Let us pray to the Lord to grant this faithful servant his reward in peace.

2. Bishop Moutel has recalled several features of your Dioceses, linked within the framework of an extensive and varied region. Although they are relatively distant, it is fortunate that you are able to work together on various projects. I am thinking in particular of the seminary in Orléans, which

involves almost all your Dioceses and whose living conditions you have recently improved.

Many believers show great generosity and take part actively and perceptively in Church life. These are true reasons for hope and signs of the Holy Spirit's active presence in the heart of the baptized and in their communities. Please convey the Bishop of Rome's cordial greetings and encouragement to the members of your Dioceses. I would especially like to express to your priests, deacons, consecrated persons and lay leaders my esteem and trust, because with great devotion they are all taking part with you in the mission Jesus entrusted to his disciples.

With the different groups of French Bishops who will be making their ad limina visits in the coming weeks, I intend to treat several topics important to the Church today, hoping to offer you some subjects for reflection in the same spirit in which the Lord asked Peter to "strengthen your brethren" (Lk 22:31). Today I will focus more on certain aspects of your episcopal ministry, but without attempting to give a full picture.

3. Bishop Moutel stressed the main difficulties you encounter. I recall two aspects that concern the whole Church in your country: in the first place, the fact that an important part of the population is still distant from the Church and does not easily hear her message; on the other hand, the decline in the number of priests affects pastoral activities, which are becoming more difficult to provide, although many lay people are assuming more and more responsibilities.

As in many other nations, you must therefore deal with the different ways the Church is impoverished or weakened; these make the Bishop's task arduous. As apostles of Christ, you are among the first to experience the cross of indifference, misunderstanding and sometimes even hostility. In a society that is often unsure of itself and is going through a prolonged economic and social crisis, you see too many people and too many of the baptized living outside the ecclesial community, rejecting in a way the institution and preferring to live in individualistic isolation: each feels he is the arbiter of his own rules of life, and even if he retains a religious sense and the Church remains a distant reference point for him, he does not live a personal faith in Jesus Christ and ignores the ecclesial dimension.

4. Naturally the analysis of this situation, which differs from place to place, affects the Pastor, who cannot remain passive. You said so in St Paul's words, "having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.... For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Cor 4:1, 5). The Bishop draws his assurance from Christ's promises and the gift of his Spirit, for "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor 1:9).

Is it necessary to repeat that episcopal responsibility belongs first and foremost to the spiritual order? Watchful and vigilant, the Pastor looks on his faithful and on the whole of society in the light of the Gospel and of his ecclesial experience. It is by listening to what "the Spirit says to the Churches" (Rv 2:7) that he can exercise his responsibilities, starting with an open and well-disposed discernment of the successes or failures, of the dynamic initiatives or unfortunate

passivity which mark the progress of the People of God.

The Second Vatican Council clearly stated the major functions of the successors of the Apostles in the Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium* and in the Decree *Christus Dominus* on the pastoral responsibility of Bishops. It is good to mediate again on these major texts of the Church's Magisterium; this reflection is of course worthwhile for anyone invested with a constitutive mission at the service of the people entrusted to him, but it must also involve the faithful.

5. I would like to strengthen you fraternally in your task of teaching and proclaiming the Gospel of Christ to men and women (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 12). The Bishop, a prophet who proclaims the Good News, tirelessly preaches it, seeking the language that is the key to the meaning of the Scriptures, as the Lord did with the disciples at Emmaus. The Council says in particular: "Bishops should present the doctrine of Christ in a manner suited to the needs of the times, that is, so it may be relevant to those difficulties and questions which men find especially worrying and intimidating" (*ibid.*, n. 13). These words suffice to show that your apostolic ministry is addressed to people of the present time, according to the needs, expressed or concealed, of the faithful who are visibly present in the diocesan community as persons standing on the threshold and searching for meaning in life.

In particular, the Bishop stands in the front line of commitment to society's poor and marginalized. He speaks out in defense of the dignity of the individual and of respect for the life of each one, of justice in charity and of solidarity. It is he who calls for service to those you have described as "life's injured", who suffer because of sickness or physical handicaps, social problems or the lack of faith and spiritual hope. In the image of the Lord who came as a Servant, the Pastor opens the ways of service to all he is called to lead.

In charity, the apostolic ministry is one of uniting people in close collaboration with the members of the presbyterate who share its responsibilities. I will return later to the current needs of priests, which are your first concern. Today it is enough to stress that priests, and with them those responsible for services and movements, rely on the Bishop for co-ordinating all the missions as a whole, so that everyone can contribute to the diocesan Church's unity and dynamism.

All your responsibilities can seem to you a heavy burden. Only the Spirit of the Lord, in communion with the whole Church, can give you the strength and light you need. Let us maintain our trust in the one Spirit, "the Lord and giver of life". Let us meditate constantly on Jesus' promise: "When the Counsellor comes whom I shall send to you from the Father, ... he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning" (Jn 15:26-27).

6. The experience of recent decades has enabled Bishops to find support for their mission. Important organs of collaboration at the regional or national level have been developed. I already mentioned these to you in Reims. The Council recommends that Bishops gather together "so that by sharing their wisdom and experience and exchanging views they may jointly formulate a programme for the common good of the Church" (*Christus Dominus*, n. 37). In fact, over and above

mere co-operation, episcopal assemblies make it possible to plan common approaches, to issue messages for the whole country, to share at regional or national levels tools of analysis and action that are not available to individual Dioceses.

As an example I take the important work, undertaken by several of you with the aid of experts, representatives of lay movements and numerous faithful, which has led you to address to the Catholics of France the Letter entitled *Proposer la foi dans la société actuelle*. I hope that this initiative by the Bishops will provide a perceptive evaluation of the situation of Catholics in contemporary society, spurring them to go to the heart of the mystery of faith, in order to form a Church which knows better and better how to offer and share the gifts received through grace.

Together you will be better able to follow the development and activity of the various communities or groups which form the present situation of the Church in your country. You will also impart their dynamism to the principal service institutions where the Church has always been involved, especially in education, the care of the sick, practical and wise charitable assistance within the country as well as to your brothers and sisters in underprivileged regions.

Together, you will also be better understood when you make yourselves the defenders of social solidarity with all the inhabitants of your land, whatever their origin.

7. Your presence in Rome further demonstrates your communion with the universal Church. I am grateful to you for the attention you pay to the Magisterium and the work of the Bishop of Rome, which you help make known and understood. And I am also thinking of your concern for all the Churches, which the Second Vatican Council forcefully stated was incumbent on each of the successors of the Apostles (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 23 and *Christus Dominus*, n. 6).

I know that your Dioceses remain attached to their great missionary tradition and that, by virtue of ancient or more recent ties, they maintain lively relations with other particular Churches, especially the young Churches frequently founded by missionaries from your regions, or the ancient Churches that are coming to life again and hoping for the effective exchange of gifts for which I have often appealed. This has already been expressed in the Special Assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishops, of which I have announced a new session.

Your communion with the whole Church is also expressed in the General Synods, such as the one being prepared precisely on the episcopal ministry, after reflections on the laity, priests and consecrated life.

8. Important tasks await you in the months and years to come. World Youth Day will soon be held in Paris after all the Dioceses in France have gathered young people from the whole world. I am grateful to everyone who is working for the success of this meeting, because these gatherings inspire great hope: young people share their approaches to faith in Christ, who calls them to follow him: "Come and see" (Jn 1:39).

This event, to be held next August, is part of the direct preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, which started with a renewed reflection on "Jesus Christ, the one Saviour of the world, yesterday, today and for ever" (cf. Heb 13:8). Help the faithful to rediscover their Baptism and the universal call to holiness, to strengthen their faith and witness, to

intensify the catechesis of every age group, to pray confidently to the Blessed Virgin, with whom “the Church with reverence enters more intimately into the supreme mystery of the Incarnation (*Lumen gentium*, n. 62)” (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, nn. 40-43). And the Jubilee must be marked by a new effort at evangelization (cf. *ibid.*, nn. 21, 40).

9. Dear Brothers, as of the Bishops of France begin their ad limina visits, I assure you of my deep communion in prayer and my firm hope for the future of your Dioceses, in which there is much lively generosity, despite the trials. May the Lord Jesus Christ give you joy in serving him as you lead in his name the diocesan Churches entrusted to your care! May the Blessed Virgin and all the saints of France intercede for you!

I warmly impart my Apostolic Blessing to you, Pastors of the Central Apostolic Region, to all those who with you give life to the Church, and to your compatriots.

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