



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE SPANISH EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE**

Saturday, 15 November 1997

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. It gives me great joy to receive you today, Archbishops and Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Valladolid, Toledo, Mérida-Badajoz, Madrid and the Military Archdiocese, who have come to Rome to renew your faith at the tomb of the Apostles. This is the first time that the Archdiocese of Mérida-Badajoz, established during the last five years, is making the *ad limina* visit by which all Bishops strengthen their bond of communion with the Successor of Peter.

I am deeply grateful to Archbishop José Delicado Baeza of Valladolid for his address in the name of all, and to each one of you for the opportunity you have given me, during our individual conversations, to know the feelings of the people you serve as Pastors, thus sharing in the desire that your flock may grow "in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph 4:15).

In order to encourage your pastoral concern, I now wish to share with you some reflections prompted by the concrete situation in which you exercise the ministry to make known and to "declare the mystery of Christ" (Col 4:3).

2. I am pleased to note the efforts you are making, both jointly and in the various Dioceses, to forge a vital, evangelizing ecclesial community that experiences a deep Christian life nourished by the Word of God, prayer and the sacraments, that is consistent with Gospel values in its personal, family and social life, and is able to express its faith in the world despite the temptation to relegate the human being's transcendent, ethical and religious dimension to the private sphere alone.

To this you have dedicated various documents of your Episcopal Conference, especially your

"Pastoral Action Plans" which in recent years have followed one another with regularity and rigorous method. Your concern is focused on the impact that profound and rapid social, economic and political changes have had on the overall concept of life and on the world of ethical and religious values in particular. Although this is indeed an enormous task, since it encompasses virtually all areas of ecclesial life, I invite you to pursue your intention to encourage, with creative fidelity to the Gospel, a Christian life-style worthy of your rich heritage and in accordance with the demands of the current era. In times of difficulty or uncertainty, remember Peter's exclamation: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:68). Only unswerving adherence to Christ will enable you to keep steadfast hope in him, "the one Saviour of the world" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 40) and to proclaim him with joy on the threshold of the third millennium.

3. In the mission of bringing the Gospel to people today, you count on the support of a very ancient and deeply-rooted Christian tradition. Your land has produced models of holiness and figures outstanding for their theological knowledge, daring missionaries and many forms of consecrated life and apostolic movements, in addition to significant expressions of piety, all of which cover your history with glory.

You can also count on the examples of art that represent a splendid religious and cultural heritage. And I am pleased to see that the Church in Spain appreciates this historical legacy, which is rightly admired by many and tangibly shows how faith in Christ ennobles man, inspires his creativity and leads him to express God's inexhaustible beauty in works of incomparable artistic value.

In this respect, it is important that the cultural and artistic property of churches, especially sacred places and objects, should not remain mere relics of the past to be passively contemplated. We must remember and retain as far as possible their original purpose, in order not to diminish their cultural value. These churches were built as places for prayer and religious celebration; these writings or melodies were composed to praise the Lord and to accompany the People of God on their pilgrimage; these are images of the models of holiness held up to believers and representing the mysteries of salvation so that they can nourish their faith and hope.

This rich heritage also serves the Church as a precious means of catechesis and evangelization. Today, as in the past, it is a strong incentive to anyone who sincerely seeks God or wants to meet him again. This is why it is not enough to preserve and protect this heritage, but "we must make it part of the lifeblood of the Church's cultural and pastoral activity" (*Address to the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church*, 12 October 1995; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 25 October 1995, p. 5). In this regard the reception given to the series of exhibitions organized in recent years, entitled *The Ages of Man*, deserves mention. They have certainly contributed to the beneficial effect this heritage has had on the evangelization of the present generations.

4. Your patrimony also includes the many forms of *popular piety* so deeply rooted in Spanish towns and villages. Despite the prevailing rationalism of certain periods in our recent history, this popular piety reflects a "thirst for God that only the poor and simple can know" (Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 48) and has shown that God speaks plainly to the heart of the human being, who has the right to express due worship in the way best suited to him.

This is how it was understood by the Second Vatican Council, which recommends "popular devotions of the Christian people, provided they conform to the laws and norms of the Church" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 13). Doubtless, in some cases customs pass on elements foreign to authentic Christian religious expression. Nonetheless the Church, concentrating more on the profound dispositions of the soul than on ritual formalism, shows understanding and patience, in accordance with St Augustine's warning: "what we teach is one thing and what we can allow another" (cf. *Contra Faustum*, 20, 21). That is why "she studies with sympathy and, if possible, preserves intact anything in these people's way of life which is not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error" (*Sacrosanctum Concilio*, n. 37).

I encourage you then to maintain and foster with paternal affection and pastoral prudence those forms of piety in which Eucharistic adoration, devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary or veneration of saints are concretely practised, avoiding illegitimate distortions and improper exaggerations through appropriate catechesis, and above all, by integrating devotion with active participation in the sacraments and the celebration of the liturgy, whose centre is Christ's paschal mystery.

5. I would also like to call your attention to one aspect that affects many of your Dioceses and which you have certainly had the opportunity to see during your pastoral visits to towns and villages where only the parents or grandparents of those who have gone to the city remain. Indeed, in a short time a predominately rural farming society is now concentrated in the cities.

First of all, this situation requires a special effort to enable those who feel left out of this new society to experience as intensely as possible the Church's closeness and the love of God, who never forgets any of his children. It will frequently be necessary to provide special help for those priests who despite the problems are still living in small country parishes, sharing the lot of their parishioners and sowing Christian hope among them. And where a permanent presence is impossible, pastoral programmes must ensure the necessary attention to religion and the proper celebration of the sacraments. We must be able to say with Jesus: "I have guarded them and none of them is lost" (Jn 17:12).

Moreover, many of these now impoverished towns actually possess a great spiritual wealth, expressed in their art, customs and especially in the vigorous faith of their residents. In no way can their existence be considered useless; it enables those who return, even if only temporarily, to rediscover the faith of their elders and the religious events they sometimes still miss.

6. You are not alone in your mission of bringing the Gospel to today's people. Working closely with you is each priest who, by celebrating the Eucharist and the other sacraments, is united to his Bishop and "so makes him present in a certain sense in individual assemblies of the faithful" (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 5).

The remarkable number of seminarians in several of your Dioceses and the appreciable increase in some of them is a source of special satisfaction. It is a sign of Christian vitality and hope for the future, especially in recently created Dioceses.

Another great treasure of the Churches over which you preside are the many religious communities of both the contemplative and active life. Each one is a gift for the Diocese, which it helps to build up by offering the experience of the Spirit proper to its charism and the evangelizing activity characteristic of its mission. Precisely in order to be an inestimable gift for the whole Church, the Bishop is urged "to support and help consecrated persons, so that, in communion with the Church, they open themselves to spiritual and pastoral initiatives responding to the needs of our time" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 49).

In this important task, respectful and fraternal dialogue will be the best way to join forces and to assure the necessary coordination of pastoral activity in each Diocese under the guidance of its Pastor.

7. All this requires the decisive contribution of the laity, who must be urged to fulfil their specific mission by encouraging them to take part regularly in the liturgy and to collaborate in catechesis, or indeed to make a responsible commitment to the movements or various ecclesial associations, always in complete communion with their own Bishop.

In fact, if the Gospel is to enlighten human life, the witness of believers' lives, consistent with the faith professed, and adequate training are necessary for giving "a Christian spirit" to the world of education or work, culture or communication, the economy or politics. This requires a thorough formation, which first of all includes a sound spirituality, based on baptismal consecration, and solid, systematic doctrinal knowledge making it possible for them "'to give a reason for their hoping' in view of the world and its grave and complex problems" (*Christifideles laici*, n. 60).

A solid formation can only be achieved by a renewed and creative catechesis, incisive and ongoing, among both young people and adults. This is a priority task for Pastors, since they are called to exercise with care their educational role as "authentic teachers ... who preach the faith to the people assigned to them, the faith which is destined to inform their thinking and direct their conduct" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 25). In this regard you will find a great help in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, whose value I wished to reaffirm when I recalled that it is the "most suitable instrument for the new evangelization" (*Address to the Presidents of the Episcopal Commissions for Catechesis*, 29 April 1993, n. 4; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 12 May 1993, p. 5). Its

dogmatic, liturgical, moral and spiritual wealth must reach everyone, especially children and young people, through diversified catechisms for parish, family, or school use, or for formation in the various movements or associations of the faithful. Dear Bishops, neither you nor your priests lack illustrious examples of preachers who, preparing themselves by prayer and diligent study, have been able to speak to peoples' hearts, preserving them in the purity of the faith and guiding them in their Christian commitment.

8. At the end of this meeting, I earnestly ask you to convey my cordial greetings to the members of your Dioceses: priests, religious communities and lay faithful. I especially remind the ecclesial communities of Extremadura, which in the past few days have been sorely tried by natural disasters that have taken a heavy toll of victims and caused much damage. Share with them the experience you have had in these days, and encourage them to live joyfully their faith in Christ our Saviour.

I entrust your intentions and pastoral projects to the motherly intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is so fervently invoked in those beloved lands, and I am pleased to impart to you my Apostolic Blessing, which I extend to all those who work with you in your episcopal ministry.

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