



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA AND THE SOLOMON ISLANDS ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

*Tuesday, 1 December 1998 Dear Brother Bishops,*1. With the encouragement which is in Christ Jesus (cf. *Phil* 2:1), I greet you, the Bishops who in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands watch over “the household of God, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth” (1 *Tim* 3:15). You are here on your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*, to the tombs of the Apostles where we are reminded of the great truth of Easter, that from the Cross of Jesus Christ the joy of new life is born. In these days of the Special Assembly for Oceania of the Synod of Bishops, you are reflecting on the newness of life in Christ, the Light of the Nations, and on the responsibility that is yours as Successors of the Apostles to communicate that life to the people entrusted to your pastoral care. I pray that this will be a time of spiritual renewal for each of you, in the grace and strength of the Holy Spirit. Your presence is a reminder of the remarkable story of the *plantatio ecclesiae* in Melanesia. It is little more than thirty years since the first dioceses were established, and yet the story both before and since is one of heroic witness and work, in the first place on the part of missionary priests and men and women religious who left everything to preach Christ and serve the peoples of your region. From many different countries and institutes they came and, united in faith, they sowed a seed in the heart of your peoples which will yield an eternal harvest. Some died a martyr’s death, and for this sacrifice above all we give glory to God, “who will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (*Rev* 7:17). Yet it was not only the foreign missionaries who gave their lives for Christ: there is also the unforgettable figure of Blessed Peter To Rot, the first fruit of the faith of your lands, offered now as an example of fidelity to God to the Church throughout the world.2. The spiritual growth of your particular Churches gives joy to us all. Yet you also speak of the hardships of the faithful whom God has entrusted to you. There are the natural disasters, of which the tidal wave in West Sepik was the most recent and one of the most devastating, bringing death to thousands and leaving the country with an immense task of human and material reconstruction. I once again pledge the Church’s solidarity with those affected, and I renew the call to the world community to offer the assistance which is still urgently required. We can do little to prevent natural disasters, but there are other sufferings caused by human beings and therefore subject to human control. Your Reports speak of a rising tide of violence and division, which makes it difficult to shape a society based on the notion and practice of the common good. The war in Bougainville may be over, but the wounds remain; and the process of healing will be long and complex. The threat of “rascalism” has become more relentless and serious, especially in the cities. Tribalism, with the spirit of vengeance it generates, also remains a problem which is deeply rooted and difficult to tackle. Corruption in its many forms is another kind of violence, which is no less real and destructive because its symptoms are often less visible. And there is yet

another kind of violence: spiritual violence in the divisiveness found in the religious sects which flourish in times of hardship and which feed off people's expectations and fears.³ The situation reflects a certain breakdown of the traditional ways of your cultures, with the consequent weakening of the structures and institutions which gave traditional societies their stability and transmitted the values which gave them life. Chief among these is the family, which has been placed under great pressure in recent times and which is always the point at which the symptoms of social malaise first appear. There is also widespread unemployment, which leaves many young people frustrated and angry, with low self-esteem and little hope for the future. But none of this is unknown to you, dear Brothers: indeed these are precisely the afflictions of your people which you bring to Christ every day in prayer and on which you are reflecting during the Synod. In a cultural situation as diversified as yours, it is never easy to overcome division and counter violence; yet the promotion of harmony and of a culture of the common good is deeply related to the truth of the Gospel and calls for your wise and energetic spiritual leadership. In the face of violence and division, there is always the temptation to reply in kind, and it is precisely this logic which is creating many of the troubles now affecting your people. Violence and division seem to be strength and seem to win the day. But the Gospel of the Crucified Christ insists that in fact they are always weakness and always defeat. Saint Paul speaks of the logic of the Cross in all its paradoxical force: "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 *Cor* 12:10). What Christ wants for Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands is true strength and true victory, the victory of grace over sin, of love over all that drives people apart.⁴ The first phase of the evangelization of your lands was slow and involved great sacrifice; and the same is true of the new phase which is now unfolding. The present stage of evangelization calls for great attention to be given to catechesis and education, if it is to ensure that the roots of the Gospel go deep into the good soil of "God's field" (1 *Cor* 3:9). This task involves a special effort particularly in three areas which are closely related: the family, the young, and community leaders. Families need greater support in situations where they are under pressure, and this support involves not just a helping hand in times of crisis but a sustained education in the values and practices which shape the Catholic vision of marriage and family life. There was a time when, despite the persistence of polygamy, traditional values and practices ensured a certain stability of families in your cultures, but in urban situations especially that is no longer the case; and this can create a vacuum which unsettles the family and thus threatens the very foundation of society. At such a time you are called to organize a great effort of education in support of the basic cell of human society. This must be an education which begins in school, which has a point of special focus in preparation for marriage, and continues throughout married life and especially in connection with the Christian initiation of children. In this task, the institutions of the Catholic school and parish remain fundamentally important.⁵ The young must be taught not just to be "a success", but to live truly Christian lives: of grace and holiness in their relationship with God, and of truth and love in all human relationships. That this is possible is clearly shown by the figure of Blessed Peter To Rot. Young people must be made to feel that they have a role and responsibility in the Church's life. They should be led little by little to sound knowledge of what the Church teaches – her faith and her moral teaching, especially as regards the common good. They should learn the supreme value of human life and the absolute dignity of the human person in a way that encourages a proper self-esteem. They should be taught to pray in a way that enables them to place their hope in God rather than in that which does not last. And all of this must be done in a way which takes account not only of the universal longings of the human heart but also of the particular cultural needs of your young people. From such a training will come the vocations to the priestly and religious life which your dioceses need now more than ever as the next phase in the evangelization of your societies unfolds and the number of foreign missionaries dwindles. The task may seem daunting, but "the love of Christ impels us" (2 *Cor* 5:14). Everything that you do for the education of the young people of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands is of immense value to them, to the Church and to society as a whole.⁶ Good education demands good teachers; and that is why the training of Church leaders –

priests, religious and catechists – is so important to your particular Churches. In seminaries and religious houses of formation every effort must be made to ensure the best possible introduction to the priestly and religious life, drawing upon the resources of both the universal Church and the riches of the local cultures. In my recent Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, I have made it clear that without a solid intellectual formation faith descends quickly into myth and superstition, which are always fertile ground for violence and division. Faith needs the work of reason if it is to flower into a culture of respect for human life and dignity, of justice and solidarity in human affairs, and of commitment to the common good. If this is true of initial formation, it is also true of the continuing education which is needed to sustain priests and religious in the midst of all the pressures which they face. In all cultures today priests and religious need a formation which is lifelong and properly adapted to the different stages of their journey. It is especially required where elements in popular culture make it more difficult to sustain a lifelong commitment to the celibate life.⁷ Dear Brothers, we teach chiefly by our own witness: who and what we are is decisive. This is supremely true of the Bishop, but it is also true of all who teach in the name of Christ – parents, priests, teachers, catechists, youth leaders. The saints and martyrs are the great teachers of the Church, for they offer the witness which nothing can rival: they teach through their total self-giving, through their blood. The history of the Church in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands may be short, but the list of martyrs is long – some of them well known, others not known at all. They must not be forgotten, for they are the supreme witnesses of the wisdom of the Cross of Jesus Christ (cf. 1 *Cor* 1:18-25). Let their names be recorded and their stories told with new understanding and joy as the Church moves towards the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. These men and women are both the greatest glory of your past and the surest pledge of your future. In the same spirit, I also urge you to encourage and support the contemplative life in your particular Churches. Those who follow the path of contemplation in the monastic life live a kind of martyrdom, and in their silence and self-emptying they are teachers of a kind especially needed now. The task before the Church in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands is extensive and complex. But in our weakness the Holy Spirit comes to help us (cf. *Rom* 8:26), moving over the deep of our hearts and creating us anew. May the fire of his love in the hearts of the faithful turn every affliction to joy and inspire the great hymn of praise which is always the song of the Church. May the Mother of Christ, Star of the Sea and Star of Evangelization, watch over you and guide you as you journey with your people to the haven of peace which God has prepared for his own. As a pledge of endless joy in Christ, who is always “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (*Jn* 14:6), I cordially impart to you and to your priests, religious and lay faithful my Apostolic Blessing. © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana