



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF AUSTRIA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" VISIT**

Friday, 20 November 1998

Your Eminence,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate!

1. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each and every one of you! I am delighted to be able to welcome you on the occasion of your *ad limina* visit. The pilgrimage to the tombs of the Princes of the Apostles is a significant moment in the life of every Pastor, for it offers him the opportunity to express his communion with the Successor of Peter and to share with him the concerns and hopes connected with the episcopal ministry.

The *affectus collegialis* brings us together in prayer, the Eucharistic celebration and meetings to reflect as brothers on the pastoral problems that most concern us. We are all moved by the desire to hear the Lord's voice amid the many voices of human opinion and thus to respond ever better to his expectations. The Successor of Peter has been entrusted with the mission of strengthening his brothers in faith (cf. Lk 22: 32) and of being in the Church "the lasting and visible source and foundation of the unity of faith and of communion" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 18), for which all Bishops, together with him and in their own way, are also responsible.

2. Several months ago my pastoral concern spurred me to make a third Pastoral Visit to you, Pastors, and to the faithful entrusted to you in Austria. On that occasion I called your attention to a theme that seems particularly urgent in the Church of your beloved country: the true meaning of dialogue in the Church. In offering you some criteria that mark dialogue as a spiritual experience, I also emphasized the risks that can make it unproductive. I considered it particularly important for you to encourage a dialogue of salvation in the Church: this dialogue "for everyone who takes part always stands under the Word of God. It therefore presupposes a minimum of willingness to communicate and of basic unity. It is the living faith transmitted by the universal Church which represents the basis of dialogue for all the parties" (Address

to the Austrian Bishops in Vienna, 21 June 1998, n. 7).

3. I am pleased that you have made true dialogue in the Churches entrusted to you a priority in your pastoral care and you are trying to involve all believers in it.

This offers us the basic theme for our considerations today: I would like to reflect with you on communion. It is the presupposition of dialogue. For this reason, in the above-mentioned address I referred to the need for “a minimum of willingness to dialogue and of basic unity”, if constructive dialogue is to take place. At the same time, communion is also the fruit of dialogue. If positions are confronted sincerely and openly, and if a basis of shared convictions supports those taking part, then the dialogue can readily lead to a deeper understanding of one another. The dialogue of salvation must be conducted in the communion of the Church. Without this basic conviction, the dialogue runs the risk of being lost in a superficial, non-committal community experience.

4. In this connection, it would be good to look at the nature and mission of the Church with the eyes of the Second Vatican Council. Leafing through the many Council documents which explain the Church’s various aspects, we come upon a viewpoint that deserves attention. When the Council texts speak of communion, they are not so concerned about questions of Church organization, about structures, areas of competence and methods, as they are about the real “thing” (*res*) from which the Church arises and for which she lives. The texts speak of the Church as mystery. Rediscovering this mystery of the Church and translating it into the Church’s life is the Council’s much-invoked “aggiornamento”, which has nothing to do either with a faddish adaptation of saving truth to contemporary tastes or with an other-worldly spiritualization of the Church into a nebulous and thus unspeakable mystery.

I remember how deeply impressed many Council Fathers were with the title “De Ecclesiae Mysterio” given to the first chapter of *Lumen gentium*. This expression was as unfamiliar to many then as it is again for many today. “Mystery” means a transcendent saving reality that is revealed in a visible way. According to the Council, the mystery of the Church consists in the fact that through Christ we have access to the Father in the Spirit so that we become sharers in the divine nature (cf. *Lumen gentium*, nn. 3-4; *Dei Verbum*, n. 1). Thus the communion of the Church is modeled on, made possible and sustained by the communion of the Triune God. The Church in a certain way is the icon of the Trinitarian communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

5. At first sight these definitions may seem far removed from the pastoral concerns of those who have to deal with the concrete problems of God’s People. I am sure you agree with me that this impression is unfounded. Whoever takes the Church seriously as a saving reality realizes that she is not so by her own power. A Church conceived exclusively as a human community could not find adequate answers to the human longing for a communion capable of supporting and giving meaning to life. Her words and actions could not withstand the seriousness of the questions weighing on human hearts. Man, in fact, longs for something that transcends him, that goes beyond all human viewpoints and reveals their inadequacy and limitedness. The Church as mystery both comforts and encourages us. She transcends us and, as such, can become God’s ambassador. In the Church God’s self-communication is offered to man’s longing to achieve complete self-fulfilment.

6. At this point the question of God arises — perhaps the most serious problem that you, as Pastors in Austria, have to

address. Even if the question of God is not raised so clearly in public, it moves human hearts all the same. Unfortunately, it is often answered today with a veiled atheism or manifest indifference. These are attitudes which conceal the desire to create human happiness and community even without God. But these attempts do not and cannot produce satisfying results. Woe to the Church if she were to be so involved in temporal issues that she had no time to devote herself to subjects which concern the Eternal!

Today there is an urgent need to support the renewal of the Church's spiritual dimension. Questions about the Church's structure automatically take second place when the decisive question about God is put on the Church's discussion agenda. This question should be patiently addressed in a sincere dialogue of salvation with men and women inside and outside the Church. In the Church-mystery we also find the key to our mission as Bishops at the service of God's People. The first question we can be asked as Pastors is not: "What have you organized?", but: "Whom have you led to communion with the Triune God?"

7. This reflection sheds light on the Church as mystery and relates it to our participation in God's saving gifts. Here the Eucharist is particularly important. Not without reason is our reception of the Eucharist also called "Communion". In this regard, St Augustine described the Eucharist as "the sign of unity and the bond of love" (*In Ioannis Evangelium Tractatus*, XXVI, VI, 13). The Council Fathers referred to this idea when they saw ecclesial communion as rooted in Eucharistic Communion: "Really sharing in the body of the Lord in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with him and with one another" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 7).

8. At this point I cannot hide two serious concerns connected with certain negative statistics: they concern participation in the Eucharistic celebration and the shortage of vocations. While I appreciate all that you are doing to protect Sunday in social and economic life, I also feel obliged to urge you: constantly and firmly remind the faithful entrusted to your care to fulfil their Sunday obligation, as Bishops have done from the earliest centuries down to our day. "Leave everything on the Lord's Day and run diligently to your assembly, because it is your praise of God. Otherwise, what excuse will they make to God, those who do not come together on the Lord's Day to hear the word of life and feed on the divine nourishment which lasts forever?" (*Didascalia Apostolorum*, II, 59, 2-3).

Tell your priests: the Pope knows the difficulties of many pastors of souls in coping with the overwork and concerns of every sort connected with their ministry. The Pope knows the pastoral zeal of many diocesan and religious priests, whose commitment sometimes brings them to the point of exhaustion. The burden is even greater in the parishes of your Dioceses, where the physical geography also demands many efforts and sacrifices.

While I express my appreciation to the priests, I also feel obliged to encourage the laity to engage in goodwilled, respectful dialogue with their priests and not to regard them as a "discontinued model" of an ecclesial structure which, in the opinion of some, could manage without the priestly ministry.

9. Precisely this conviction, widespread even among believing men and women, is surely related to the declining number of vocations in your local Churches. I know the efforts you are making to help young people meet Christ and discover the call he gives each of them to a particular task in the Church. Moreover, we are well aware that vocations cannot be "made" by people, but must be sought from God in constant prayer. A vocation — especially at first — is like a tender,

vulnerable bud which needs much care and attention. There must be a vital relationship between those who are priests already and the young people who may feel a faint yearning to follow this way. It is very important for young people to meet happy, believable priests who are deeply convinced of the decision they have made and have warm bonds of friendship with their confrères and their Bishop. For this reason, the Bishop must not be perceived as a distant “official” or a condescending “boss”, but must be regarded as a father and friend by those who serve the faithful with him.

The cultivation of true communion between priests and Bishops and their joyful co-operation for the good of the Church are the best soil for vocations to flourish. This was already stressed by the Council: the Bishop should conduct himself among those entrusted to him “as one who serves, as a good shepherd who knows his sheep and whose sheep know him, as a true father”, so that priests will see themselves as their “sons and friends” (*Christus Dominus*, n. 16).

10. Venerable Brothers, despite everything one certainty gives us strength: the signs of the dawning salvation outnumber the negative trends. Proof of this are the two Tables that the Lord in his goodness continually prepares for us: the Table of God’s Word and the Table of the Eucharist (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 51; *Dei Verbum*, n. 21). It is you, as Bishops, who have the high honour as well as the sacred duty to serve as hosts *in persona Christi*, so that the faithful can be abundantly nourished at the Table of the Word and Sacrament.

11. In the Council documents the Church is described as “*creatura Verbi*”, since “such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigour, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life” (*Dei Verbum*, n. 21; cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 2). This awareness has awakened in the People of God a lively interest in Sacred Scripture, with doubtless benefit for each one’s faith journey.

Unfortunately, there have also been misunderstandings and erroneous developments: some views of the Church have crept up that do not correspond to the biblical data or to the Church’s Tradition. The biblical expression “people of God” (*laos tou theou*) has been understood in the sense of a popular political assembly (*dimos*) organized along lines applicable to any other societal group. And since the democratic form of government is most in harmony with contemporary sensitivities, many of the faithful have called for a democratization of the Church. Calls of this sort have increased in your country too, as well as beyond its borders. At the same time, the authentic interpretation of God’s Word and the proclamation of the Church’s teaching have often been replaced by a wrongly understood pluralism, leading to the idea that revealed truth can be determined by popular surveys and decided democratically.

How can we not feel deep sadness when we see that these mistaken ideas about faith and morality, and about certain matters of Church discipline, have taken root in the minds of so many members of laity? No “base” can determine revealed truth. Truth is not produced by a “church from below”, but comes from “on high”, from God. Truth is not a human creation, but a gift from heaven. The Lord himself entrusted it to us, the Successors of the Apostles, so that — endowed with “a sure charism of truth” (*Dei Verbum*, n. 8) — we might transmit it intact, guard it jealously and explain it faithfully (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 25).

12. With affectionate understanding of the deeply felt concerns of your ministry, I say to you: Venerable Brothers, have the courage of love and truth! Certainly, you are right not to accept anything as truth if it lacks charity. But do not accept

anything as love if it lacks truth! Preaching the truth in love to people — this is the real remedy for error. I ask you to fulfil this task with all your strength. What Paul wrote to his disciple Timothy is addressed to each of us: “Bear hardship along with me as a good soldier of Christ Jesus... Try hard to make yourself worthy of God’s approval, a workman who has no cause to be ashamed, following a straight course in preaching the truth... Preach the word, stay with this task whether convenient or inconvenient — correcting, reproving, appealing — constantly teaching and never losing patience” (2 Tm 2:3, 15; *ibid.*, 4:2).

13. Just as I share your concerns, I am also pleased to share your joy over what you have been accomplishing in the Church and in society for the culture of life. It is the culture of life that spans the poles of truth and love. Courageously persevere in bearing witness to the teaching handed down to you and remain firm in it.

I would particularly like to mention marriage. Even if human experience is often powerless over the breakdown of so many marriages, sacramental marriage is and remains indissoluble according to the will of God. Another example: even if the majority of society decides otherwise, the dignity of every human being remains inviolable from conception in his mother’s womb to natural death, when God wills it. And again: despite the recurring debate, as though it were merely a disciplinary question, the Church has not received any authority whatsoever from the Lord to confer priestly ordination on women (cf. Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, n. 4).

14. I will not address other subjects, however significant. But one fact I cannot fail to mention: although in the world we find an ever greater sense of the unity of individuals and peoples, while respecting their valuable cultural characteristics, sometimes there is an impression that the Church in your country is yielding to the temptation to turn in on herself, in order to deal with sociological questions rather than to be enthused about the larger catholic unity: that universal communion, which is the communion of particular Churches gathered round the Successor of Peter (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 23).

Venerable Brothers, seek every opportunity to invite your faithful to raise their sights beyond the church towers of Austria. The Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 could be the perfect occasion to help your faithful to experience a new passion for the richness of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, and to help them love her more intensely.

15. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate! With great affection I entrust to you these reflections on the Church as communion. Much could be said and written about communion, but the most important thing is that we, as Successors of the Apostles, seek to live it blamelessly. Lastly, I would like to confide a wish to you: in the past few months and years many things have been written about the Church in Austria. Would it not be a good sign if there were less discussion in your country about the Church and more dedication instead to meditation on the Church? I said at the beginning that the Church as communion represents the icon of the communion of the Triune God. Critical analysis fails before an icon. We must abandon ourselves to loving contemplation, if we are to enter more and more deeply into the divine mystery: it is against this background that we can truly understand the Church.

16. I close my words with an invitation to you to look at that icon of ecclesial communion which is the Blessed Virgin, so revered by many of your compatriots: “Eternally present in the mystery of Christ” (*Redemptoris Mater*, n. 19), she remains among the Apostles in the heart of the early Church and the Church in every age. Then “the Church gathered in

the Upper Room with Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and his brethren. Thus, one cannot speak of the Church, unless Mary, the Mother of the Lord, is also present with his brethren” (Chromatius of Aquileia, *Sermo 30*, 1).

May Mary, the Magna Mater Austriae, be your companion and intercessor in your efforts to fulfil your ministry with a joyful, courageous *sentire cum Ecclesia* and to help form an *anima ecclesiastica* in the faithful entrusted to you. Assuring you of a constant remembrance in my prayer, so that the Spirit will assist you on your journey with the abundance of his gifts, I cordially impart to you and to all the members of your Dioceses my Apostolic Blessing.

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