



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
TO THE GERMAN BISHOPS
ON THE OCCASION OF THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday 20 November 1999

Your Eminence,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate!

1. "With the affection of Christ Jesus" (*Phil* 1: 8), I welcome you, the third group of German Bishops, to this meeting on the occasion of your *ad limina* visit. I thank the heavenly Father for the commitment we share in spreading the Gospel (cf. *Phil* 1: 5) and for the communion of faith and love that unites us in serving the People of God. With you I greet the particular Churches over which you preside with great dedication. Prompted by my "anxiety for all the Churches" (*2 Cor* 11: 28), I ask you to assure the priests, deacons, religious and laity of your Dioceses that the Pope shares their joys and difficulties, and that he prays for their continual growth in grace and holiness of life. In this sense your *ad limina* visit becomes a spiritual pilgrimage, for you have come not only to fulfil an administrative or juridical obligation of the episcopal office, but also to show authentic brotherhood and solidarity in the love of Christ, the chief Shepherd (cf. *1 Pt* 5: 4), who sends his ministers to the Church on her journey through time, "so that, sharing in his power, they might make all peoples his disciples and sanctify and govern them" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 19).

As I did during my two previous meetings with the Bishops of your country, today too I would like to develop an essential aspect of the "universal sacrament of salvation" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 48).

My thoughts will focus on a fundamental topic: the Church as mystery. Since in our daily pastoral ministry we must be concerned about so many things in our varied activities, every now and then we need to take a few moments to lift the veil that often blocks our vision and to open our eyes to what is truly essential beneath the surface.

2. I would like to recall an idea expressed by my Predecessor of blessed memory Pope Paul VI in his Encyclical *Eccelesiam suam* regarding the Church and her own awareness of her nature and mission. The invitation he made 35 years ago while the Second Vatican Council was in session can serve the Church today as a key to properly understanding the "signs of the time" on the threshold of the third millennium: "In this moment the Church must reflect on herself to find strength in the knowledge of her place in the divine plan, to find greater light, new energy and more joy in fulfilling her own mission, and to determine the best means for making more immediate, effective and beneficial her contacts with mankind" (ch. I). We should thank God that the Church in our day is also making every effort in the power of the risen Lord to "reveal in the world, faithfully, even though darkly, his mystery until, in the consummation, it shall be manifested in full light" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 8).

We should not forget, of course, that the Church herself, as a "sign and instrument of communion with God and of the unity of all mankind", is a mystery. With good reason the first chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* is entitled "The Mystery of the Church". Therefore, the Church cannot be genuinely renewed, unless our starting-point is her nature as mystery. What the Council had expressly stated was called to mind once again by the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops held 20 years after the close of that ecclesial assembly: "Inasmuch as she is communion with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Church is, in Christ, the 'mystery' of the love of God present in human history" (*Message*, II). This truth should mark the teaching, ministry and pastoral activity of the whole Church. This conviction also forms the basis of all the post-conciliar documents of the papal Magisterium, which are meant to foster a renewal in keeping with contemporary needs.

3. It should be noted, moreover, that the same Extraordinary Synod of 1985 felt obliged to raise a warning: the assembled Bishops admitted that "a partial and selective reading of the Council, a one-sided presentation of the Church as a purely institutional structure devoid of her mystery", has led to serious deficiencies particularly in certain lay organizations which "critically consider the Church a mere institution" (*Final Document*, I, 4). As a result, many claim the right to organize the Church as if she were a multinational corporation and thus subject to a purely human form of authority. In reality, the Church as mystery is not "our" but "his" Church: the People of God, the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate! The Apostle Paul urges us: "Test everything; retain what is good" (1 Thes 5: 21). The Bishop's task is to encourage priests and all those who share responsibility for pastoral care to work towards the spiritual renewal of parishes. Anyone who rushes from one event to another is soon out of breath. In order to prevent spiritual exhaustion, it is more and more necessary to catch one's breath in prayer. For the liveliest parish is not the one with the fullest schedule of events, but the community that concentrates everything it does on its call to live in communion with the Triune God by listening to the word of God and participating in the sacraments. This need has been stressed by many advocates of an ecclesiology of *communio*

inspired by the Council's teaching, to which theologians from your country have also rendered great service.

4. We are at the end of the preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. This year is dedicated to the first person of the divine Trinity. Reflection on God the Father inevitably leads to the Church, as St Cyprian summarized in a splendid phrase: "No one can have God as Father who does not have the Church as Mother" (*De ecclesiae catholicae unitate*, 6).

This statement, which the Bishop of Carthage felt was necessary after the experiences of Decius' persecutions and the incidents regarding the *lapsi*, prompted the wish "that, if possible, none of the brothers [and sisters] would perish, and that the Mother would joyfully gather to her bosom the one body of a united people" (*De ecclesiae catholicae unitate*, 23). We all know the great difference between the message entrusted to the Church and the human frailty of those who preach the Gospel. However history may judge these weaknesses, we should not forget this deficiency. On the contrary, we must do our best to prevent it from harming the spread of the Gospel. For this "Mother Church never ceases to pray, hope and work, and she exhorts her children to purification and renewal so that the sign of Christ may shine more brightly over the face of the Church" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 15).

5. While the Church shows motherly concern and solidarity for her sons and daughters, at the same time she stands before them. The *Mater* is also *Magister*; she has the authority to bring up and teach her children, and so lead them to salvation. Mother Church gives birth to her sons and daughters; she nurtures and educates them. She gathers her children together and sends them out, all the while assuring them that they are safe in her motherly bosom. At the same time she is saddened by those who have fallen away and holds the door open to reconciliation, which is her constant concern. You Pastors have a particular responsibility in this regard: as "fathers of your communities", you have the right and duty to exercise the Church's "maternal authority", as the Second Vatican Council put it so clearly: in their preaching, the Bishops should "proclaim the maternal solicitude of the Church for all people, whether they be Catholics or not, and should be especially solicitous for the poor and weaker brethren.... Since it is the mission of Church to maintain close relations with the society in which she lives, the Bishops should make it their special care to approach people and initiate and promote dialogue with them. These discussions on religious matters should be marked by charity of expression as well as by humility and courtesy, so that the truth may be combined with charity, and understanding with love. The discussions should likewise be characterized by due prudence allied, however, with sincerity, which by promoting friendship is conducive to union of minds" (*Christus Dominus*, n. 13).

6. The Church's sons and daughters must respond to her motherly affection with heartfelt obedience. At a time when maturity is spoken of so often not only in society but especially in the Church, there is an ever growing attitude that true freedom can be achieved by "cutting the umbilical cord to the Church". As Bishops, you are trying to correct such erroneous tendencies by

clearly and unambiguously preaching and living what was always a rule of life for the great saints: even in personally difficult situations, they never left the bosom of Mother Church. I would like to return to Cyprian's analogy and complete it: only those who heed Mother Church obey God the Father. The Bishop of Carthage developed this idea by pointing out the serious consequences, which are still possible since his time: "Whatever forsakes its mother's womb can neither live nor breathe on its own, but loses the possibility of salvation" (*De ecclesiae catholicae unitate*, n. 23).

7. These thoughts are not unrealistic. As Shepherds of your flocks in Germany, you too must have experienced, especially in recent years, the great demands that the office of leadership makes on your strength and energy when particular groups try, through concerted action and continuous pressure, to bring about changes in the Church that do not correspond to the will of Jesus Christ. In view of this situation, the Bishop's task is to take the lead, to show the way, to clarify, calm and always try to bring people together - all this through dialogue. I ask you: do not be discouraged!

While listening and reaching out, do not allow any human power to loosen the indissoluble bonds between you and the Successor of Peter!

At this point I would like to address a word to the laity. I express my heartfelt appreciation of the countless men and women who faithfully fulfil their call as a chosen race and royal priesthood (cf. 1 Pt 2: 9). In the light of their actions, I likewise point out the attitude that the laity should have towards their Bishops and priests: "To their Pastors they should disclose their needs and desires with that liberty and confidence which befits children of God and brothers of Christ.... If the occasion arises, this should be done through the institutions established by the Church for that purpose and always with truth, courage and prudence and with reverence and charity towards those who, by reason of their office, represent the person of Christ" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 37).

Unity with the Bishop is the essential and indispensable attitude of the faithful Catholic, for one cannot claim to be on the Pope's side without also standing by the Bishops in communion with him.

Nor can one claim to be with the Bishops without standing by the Head of the College.

8. Venerable Brothers! I greatly appreciate that you are doing everything you can to give your faithful an example of *communio* within the Church. I am indeed aware that your primary concern is to put every pastoral initiative into a framework that is in full agreement with the world's Bishops gathered around the Successor of Peter.

Here I am thinking especially of the problem of the defence of life, in which it is essential for all the Bishops of the universal Church to bear unanimous and unambiguous witness. From the letters written by me or at my direction, you can gather how concerned I am about the counseling and aid given to pregnant women. I hope that this significant Church activity in your country will soon be

definitively reorganized according to my instructions. I am convinced that Church counseling which is distinguished by its quality will be an eloquent sign for society and an effective way to help women in distress to accept the life they carry in their womb.

9. Speaking of the royal priesthood in connection with the relationship between ordained pastors and the laity, I would like to recall the common priesthood. Thanks be to God that the Second Vatican Council brought this profound truth back to light! In the New Covenant there is only one sacrifice and one priest: Jesus Christ. All the baptized, men and women, have a share in this sacrifice of Christ, for they should "present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (*Rom* 12: 1). This participation involves not only the priestly, but also the prophetic and kingly mission of Christ. It expresses, moreover, the Church's organic union with Christ, which the Letter to the Ephesians describes with the image of bridegroom and bride (cf. *Eph* 5: 21-33).

Here we find ourselves at the heart of the paschal mystery, which reveals God's spousal love in all its depth. Christ is the bridegroom because he gave himself: he gave his body and shed his blood for us (cf. *Lk* 22: 19-20). The fact that Jesus "loved to the end" (*Jn* 13: 1) emphasizes the nuptial meaning of love. Christ as Redeemer is the bridegroom of the Church. So we should rightly see the Eucharist, in which Christ builds up his Body, the Church, as the sacrament of the bridegroom and his bride.

As a consequence, there is a fundamental difference between the common priesthood of all the baptized and the priesthood of the ordained ministers (cf. *Interdicasterial Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests*). The Church needs ordained priests who in sacramental celebrations act "in persona Christi" and represent Christ the bridegroom in relation to the Church as bride. In other words: the ordained pastors, who are members of the one Body of the Church, represent its head, who is Christ. Therefore, any attempt to clericalize the laity or to laicize the clergy must be rejected. It does not correspond to the mysterious ordering of the Church as willed by her Founder. Nor are tendencies that eliminate the essential difference between clergy and laity of any use in attracting vocations. I ask you, dear Brothers, to keep alive in your parish communities a deep desire for ordained priests. Even a long period of waiting, due to the current shortage of priests, should not lead a community to accept an emergency situation as the rule. Priests and laity need each other. They cannot replace but only complement one another.

10. At this point another observation is particularly useful: in your land, there is growing discontent with the Church's attitude towards the role of women. Unfortunately, not everyone seems to be aware yet that all the statements made about the common priesthood of the baptized apply equally to men and women. Without doubt, the dignity of women is great and must be more and more appreciated! However, too little consideration is given to the difference between the human and civil rights of the person and his rights, duties and related functions in the Church. Precisely for this reason, some time ago, by virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren, I recalled "that

the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgement is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful" (*Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, n. 4).

As the authentic Pastors of your Dioceses, you have the duty to reject contrary opinions put forward by individuals or organizations and to encourage that open and clear dialogue in truth and love which Mother Church must foster regarding the future of her daughters. Do not hesitate, then, to emphasize that the Magisterium of the Church has taken this decision not as an act of her own power, but in the knowledge of her duty to obey the will of the Lord of the Church herself.

Therefore, the doctrine that the priesthood is reserved to men possesses, by virtue of the Church's ordinary and universal Magisterium, that character of infallibility which *Lumen gentium* speaks of and to which I gave juridical form in the Motu Proprio *Ad tuendam fidem*: When the individual Bishops, "even though dispersed throughout the world but preserving among themselves and with Peter's Successor the bond of communion, agree in their authoritative teaching on matters of faith and morals that a particular teaching is to be held definitively and absolutely, they infallibly proclaim the doctrine of Christ" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 25; cf. *Ad tuendam fidem*, n. 3).

Of course, we should help those who cannot understand or accept the Church's teaching to open their hearts and minds to the challenge that the faith poses to them. As authentic teachers of the Church who is mother and teacher, it must be one of our highest priorities to help and support the faith of our communities. Therefore, we should stop at nothing, if necessary, to dispel confusion and correct errors. So I invoke the gifts of the Holy Spirit on your efforts to give an authentic character based on Christian doctrine to the role of women - for the renewal of society and for the rediscovery of the Church's true face.

11. Dear Brothers! During this meeting we have considered the Church first and foremost as a mystery. A mystery ultimately escapes the grasp of human reason. Only with the eyes of faith can it be considered lovingly and be understood in depth. The images of the Church as mother and teacher, as bride and body, have always brought us back to Christ, the bridegroom and head of his Church. We feel under particular obligation to him in our pastoral ministry. So the words I have addressed to you at these meetings have been clear and unambiguous. I cannot hide the fact that in recent months I have often felt like the Apostle when he addressed those well-known words to the community in Corinth: "I wrote you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you" (2 *Cor* 2: 4).

Tell your priests, deacons and religious that the Pope is close to them! Assure the men and women, the young and old, the sick and disabled that they can all find refuge in the bosom of Mother Church. With patience, trust and love endeavour to support the local Churches entrusted to each of you and lead them like a bride to the heavenly wedding feast.

I ask the Virgin Mary for her protection and call upon her to intercede for you and for everyone

entrusted to your pastoral care. What childlike trust is expressed in the words of an old prayer that is widely known in your homeland: Blessed Virgin, God's Mother and mine, let me always be truly thine!

May the Apostolic Blessing I cordially give you accompany each and every one of you.

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