



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF WESTERN CANADA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 30 October 1999

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. In the love of Christ through whom "we have received the grace of apostleship" (*Rom 1: 5*), I welcome you, the *Bishops of Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, the Northwest Territories, the Yukon and the newly-established territory of Nunavit*, as you come on your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*. The ministry we have received brings with it not only great joys but also at times heavy burdens and even sorrows. All of these you bring to the Tombs of the Apostles, so that you may learn once again from their eternal witness that, whatever the burdens and sorrows, the apostolic ministry which we have received is indeed a great joy for us and for the whole People of God, for it is none other than the joy of preaching the Gospel, which is "the power of God for salvation" (*Rom 1: 16*). Experiencing that joy anew here in Rome, you reaffirm the bond of hierarchical communion with the Successor of Peter and the entire College of Bishops, which is the surest sign and safeguard of the Church's unity and perseverance in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic faith.

2. The approach of the Great Jubilee and the new millennium encourages us to meditate upon the mystery of time, which is of fundamental importance in Revelation and in Christian theology (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 10). This is because within time the world was created and within time God's plan for the world's redemption unfolded, rising to its summit in the Incarnation of the Son of God. Since time is the arena of both creation and redemption, which come to their fullness in Christ, we may say that "in the Word made flesh, time becomes a dimension of God, who is himself eternal" (*ibid.*). From this there flows the Church's duty to sanctify time, which she does especially in the liturgical commemoration of the events of salvation history and in her celebration of special occasions and anniversaries. This sanctification of time is a recognition of the truth

proclaimed by the Church in the Easter Vigil, that all time and all the ages belong to Christ (cf. Service of Light). "Christ is the Lord of time; he is its beginning and end; every year, every day, every moment are embraced by his Incarnation and Resurrection, and thus become part of 'the fullness of time' " (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, 10; cf. *Incarnationis mysterium*, n. 1; *Dies Domini*, n. 15). To sanctify time is therefore to recognize what God has made of time in Jesus, how in the Paschal Mystery time itself is transfigured.

For the world unredeemed, time is always a terror, because it leads inexorably to the experience of life's limits and the enigma of death. All religion, therefore, deals in some way with the most basic questions: What is man? What is the purpose of life? What follows this earthly existence? (Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 10). In the Resurrection of Jesus Christ the terror of time is destroyed once and for all, for if death loses its sting in the moment of Easter (cf. 1 Cor 15: 55), then so too does time. It is the Resurrection which breaks down the seemingly impenetrable barrier between time and eternity and opens the way to the full experience of time as a gift and a challenge. In this sense St Paul urges Christ's followers to "make the most of the time, for the days are evil" (*Eph* 5: 16). His call is especially meaningful when applied to the Bishop's responsibilities for the life of the Christian community committed to his care.

3. Ultimately, it is because of the Incarnation and the sacramental vision which it entails (cf. *Oriente lumen*, n. 11) that the Church is so deeply immersed in the world - in time, and therefore in all things human. Because the Word was made flesh, the human body matters; the physical, social and cultural conditions of the human family matter. Because the Word was made flesh in time, human history matters; the daily lives of men and women matter. From this perspective we can say that the Church is "worldly" in a very positive sense, just as God himself was worldly when he sent his Son among us as a man. To be worldly in this way means that the Church wholeheartedly engages history and culture, but in order to transform them, to turn fear into joy by the power of the Gospel.

Yet Christianity is also an eschatology. The New Testament leaves no doubt that these are "the last days", that the world as we know it is passing away and is therefore in no way absolute, let alone divine. It is true that even in the New Testament we see signs of the cooling of the first eschatological fervour, as the initial expectation of an imminent return of the Lord faded. But, despite this reshaping of eschatological expectation, the Church has never ceased to look for the Lord's return, which will be the end of the world but also the full completion of its redemption. Thus, the Christian understanding of Sunday as "the eighth day", which draws upon the rich eschatological symbolism of the Jewish Sabbath in order to evoke "the age to come" (cf. *Dies Domini*, n. 26), reminds us not only of the beginning when God made all things but points to the end when he will restore all things in Christ (cf. *Eph* 1: 10).

Christian living therefore embraces elements both incarnational and eschatological; and our prime concern as Pastors is to ensure that there is a balance between them, that the Churches over

which we preside in Christ's name are neither too worldly nor too unworldly, that they are "in the world but not of it" (cf. *Jn* 17: 11, 15-16). Crucial here is the question of the relationship between the Church and the world, which was a fundamental theme of the Second Vatican Council and remains central to the life of the Church at the dawn of the new millennium, not least in your own country.

The answer we give to this question will determine the course we set in addressing a range of other pressing issues.

4. As shepherds, we must lead the flock of Christ along a path which avoids the temptation either to eliminate or to exaggerate the boundaries between the Church and the world, between the Christian message and the prevalent culture of our age. Neither elimination nor exaggeration is what the Gospel intends; neither is faithful to the Council's teaching; neither can be the way into the future which God has in mind for the Church. We need another way, and the teaching of Pope Paul VI can help us to find it. *Ecclesiam suam* has often been regarded as "the Encyclical of dialogue" and with good reason, because it spells out in detail what Pope Paul described as the "attitude" which the Church should adopt at this period in the history of the world (cf. ch. III), an attitude which involves both a style and a method of relating to modern society. Circumstances have certainly changed in the years since *Ecclesiam suam* was written, yet its teaching on the Church's dialogue with the world remains at least as pertinent now as it was in 1964. In speaking of dialogue, Paul VI used the phrase *colloquium salutis*. This dialogue (*colloquium*) has its foundation in what St John has written, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (*Jn* 3:16). The Church has a priceless gift for the men and women of every time and place, which she cannot fail to offer, even when her offer is misunderstood or refused.

5. An integral part of this gift is the truth about the human person created in God's image, fully revealed in Jesus Christ and entrusted to the Church. We Bishops above all must never lose confidence in our call to humble and resolute service of that truth, as teachers and shepherds called to defend and spread that truth at a crucial historical moment, when new knowledge, new technology and unprecedented material wealth are bringing into being a "new world" of human achievement and responsibility. A first area of our defence of the truth about man is the defence of the inalienable dignity and value of life itself. As you have stressed in your teaching, the "Gospel of life" is not a mere option for Christians; it is an essential dimension of our obedience to God. Everyone has a serious obligation to be at the service of this Gospel: "We are all involved and we all share in it, with the inescapable responsibility of choosing to be unconditionally pro-life" (*Evangelium vitae*, n. 28). In catechesis, in education, in the field of medical research and practice, among legislators and those responsible for public life, as well as in the media, a great effort must be made to present the "Gospel of life" with the full force of its truth.

As Pastors, you are fully aware of how many "truths" are voiced today about fundamental

questions of human behaviour, making the preaching and teaching of Christian morality an uphill struggle in many cases. So many Bishops, priests and lay people have told me how extremely helpful the Catechism of the Catholic Church has been in the whole task of Christian formation. This compendium of the Church's teaching can be a most effective tool in transmitting a deep and solid knowledge of the faith and of the rules of Christian life, in parishes, schools, universities and seminaries. In recent decades there have been cases in which efforts to make the truths of the faith more accessible, especially in the catechesis of children and young people, have ended up emptying the Christian message of its essence and power. Perhaps there is nothing more urgent in your pastoral ministry, nothing for which you are more responsible before the Lord, than to ensure the transmission of the faith handed down to us by the Apostles.

6. To teach the faith and to evangelize is to speak an absolute and universal truth to the world; but it is our duty to speak in appropriate and meaningful ways which make people receptive to that truth. In considering what this entails, Paul VI specified four qualities, which he calls *perspicuitas*, *lenitas*, *fiducia*, *prudentia* - clarity, humanity, confidence and prudence (*Ecclesiam suam*, n. 81). To speak with clarity means that we must explain comprehensibly the truth of Revelation and the Church's teachings. We should not simply repeat but explain. In other words, we need a new apologetic, geared to the needs of today, which keeps in mind that our task is not just to win arguments but to win souls, to engage not in ideological bickering but to vindicate and promote the Gospel. Such an apologetic will need to find a common "grammar" with those who see things differently and do not share our assumptions, lest we end up speaking different languages even though we may be using the same tongue.

This new apologetic will also need to breathe a spirit of humanity, that compassionate humility which understands people's anxieties and questions and which is not quick to presume in them ill will or bad faith. At the same time, it will not yield to a sentimental sense of the love and compassion of Christ sundered from the truth, but will insist instead that true love and compassion can make radical demands, precisely because they are inseparable from the truth which alone sets us free (cf. *Jn* 8: 32).

To speak with confidence will mean that, however much others may deny us any specific competence or reproach us for the failings of the Church's members, we must never lose sight of the fact that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the truth for which all people long, no matter how distant, resistant or hostile they may seem.

And finally prudence, which Paul VI calls practical wisdom and good sense, and which Gregory the Great considers the virtue of the brave (*Moralia*, 22, 1), will mean that we give a clear answer to people who ask: "What must we do?" (*Lk* 3: 10, 12, 14). Pope Paul VI concluded by affirming that to speak with *perspicuitas*, *lenitas*, *fiducia* and *prudentia* "will make us wise; it will make us teachers" (*Ecclesiam suam*, n. 83). That is what we are called to be above all, dear Brothers - teachers of the truth, who never cease to pray for "the grace to see life whole and the power to

speak effectively of it" (Gregory the Great, *On Ezekiel*, I, 11, 6).

7. What we teach is not a truth of our own devising, but a revealed truth which has come to us through Christ as an incomparable gift. We are sent forth to proclaim this truth and to call those who hear us to what the Apostle Paul defines as "the obedience of faith" (*Rom* 1: 5).

May the Canadian Martyrs, whose memory you are celebrating with special joy on this 350th anniversary of their death, never cease to teach Christ's faithful in Canada the truth of this obedience and this dying to self in order to live for Christ. May they teach the Church in Canada the mystery of the Cross, and may the seed of their sacrifice bear a rich harvest in Canadian hearts! To the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Queen of Apostles and Queen of Martyrs, and to the protection of St Joseph her spouse, I entrust the entire household of God in your country. Upon you, and upon the priests, women and men religious and lay faithful of your Dioceses I cordially bestow my Apostolic Blessing.

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