The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF BRAZIL
FROM THE REGIONS 1 AND 4
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

Saturday, 26 October 2002

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. The liturgy of these days reminds us of our common vocation and the grace each one of us has received: "for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ until we all attain ... to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4,12-13). We must all do our utmost to build the Body of Christ, making the most of the providential wealth of charisms which the Holy Spirit never ceases to bring forth to life in the community.

I am pleased to receive you collegially, after our individual meetings. The kind words of *Archbishop Celso José Pinto da Silva* of Teresina, on behalf of Regions 1 and 4 of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops, have explained the many hopes that impel the Christian communities which divine Providence has entrusted to your pastoral care, without overlooking the anxieties and problems found in a land undergoing profound social changes.

2. It cannot be denied that the situations of Ceará and Piauí, and North-East Brazil in general, demonstrate the modernization of the structures created for their development. However, in various respects, this modernization goes hand in hand with the harsh marginalization of entire populations.

In the past ten years there has been an effort to combat illiteracy, endemic disease and the rate of infant mortality; coexistence with poverty and chronic wretchedness, largely due to immigration from rural areas to the city; the problems of the fair distribution of land and attention to the people who work on the sea, in addition to a wide range of other problems, without forgetting drought and

flooding, two sides of the same coin. All these things are constant causes of concern for the local authorities, let alone the pastoral planning of the different dioceses.

Your particular Churches were founded in the last century and are therefore relatively young. Proper to young people are dynamism, spirit of initiative and daring, things that belong to the Brazilian nationality where one can find the strength to face the prevailing challenges. Both Provinces must face the lack of clergy; you must develop evangelization and catechesis, for adults and children, in the rural areas and in cities. You must guide those who are involved in the decision-making and students, at all levels. I am aware of your dedication to preaching justice and brotherhood in one of the poorest areas of the country. You deserve praise for your commitment and coordination in pastoral work, and especially to promote the vocations of seminarians with educated formation directors, and to foster the continuing formation of priests. I ask God to help you in your material needs, because the lack of means and the cost of the seminarians' formation cannot hinder the task of forming workers for his harvest.

With the enthusiasm of faith that nothing can destroy, I would like to *encourage the evangelizing work of your dioceses,* and I urge you to throw your whole selves into it with new missionary zeal, for the spread of the Kingdom of God in this world.

3. These are apostolic initiatives that are spreading in your particular Churches. The religious reawakening, especially among young people, is tangible and encouraging. A source of hope is the sensitivity of the growing inclination of the faithful for a Christian practice that is firmer and more consistent. The people of the North-East are deeply religious. They are interested in the life of the Church and constantly open to the transcendent dimension of life, although they need guidance in the area of popular devotion, and an inculturation that should be in conformity with the Gospel.

However, many obstacles can sap the enthusiasm of Christians, due to the frequently negative influence of the consumer society which is threatening to cloud the brightness of the Gospel proclamation. It is necessary to develop in the faithful a firm and consistent faith, because only the effective rediscovery of Christ as a foundation on which to build the life of the entire society will enable them not to fear any kind of difficulty: when the house is founded on the solid rock, it does not fall, despite the rushing waters of the rivers overflowing their banks with the torrential downpour or the threatening powerful winds (cf. Mt 7,24-25).

A qualitative leap in Christian life must be made so that people witness clearly and transparently to their faith. This faith, celebrated and shared in the liturgy and in charity, nourishes and strengthens the community of the Lord's disciples and builds them up as a missionary and prophetic Church. May no one feel excluded from this apostolic commitment!

4. At the beginning of the new millennium, when I wanted to call attention to certain pastoral

priorities which were born of the experience of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, I did not hesitate to point out first of all that "all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness" (*Novo Millennio ineunte,* n. 30). Today and in the past, the Church has responded to the "*universal call to holiness*", highlighted in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium,* with myriads of saints, some of whom are universally known whereas others remain anonymous. They have all been able to live an unconditional sacrifice for God, embracing the Cross of Christ through *contempt of the world,* that detachment from the world which distinguished them, or the *consecration of the world* that is proper to lay people "in any state or walk of life", who "are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love" (*Lumen gentium,* n. 40).

The Church needs *holy priests* and *religious* who distinguish themselves by their exclusive consecration and their founding charism, to carry out the task of evangelization with generosity and self-sacrifice in the essential mission entrusted to them, after the example of Mother Paulina, the foundress of the Congregation of the "Irmãzinhas da Imaculada Conceição" (Little Sisters of the Immaculate Conception), whom I canonized last May. Today, more than ever, the Church needs *holy lay people* who can be raised to the honour of the altars after seeking Christian perfection in the midst of temporal reality, in the exercise of their own intellectual or manual work, totally pleasing to God, to whom they dedicate themselves for his honour and glory. Vocations to the priesthood and to the religious life will be born among them.

5. Today I would like to turn my thoughts to the priests, men and women religious and lay people who are doing all in their power to spread the Gospel truth, often amid great difficulties. Many of them are collaborating or taking an active part in the associations, movements and other forms of group existence which, in common with the Pastors and in accord with the diocesan initiatives, bring their spiritual, educational and missionary riches to the heart of the Church as a precious experience and proposal of Christian life.

On my various pastoral visits and apostolic journeys I have been able to appreciate the results of this presence in many areas of society, in the world of work, in international solidarity with the most deprived, in ecumenical commitment, in priestly brotherhood, in assistance to families and youth, and in many other areas of concern.

This reality represents a multiform variety of charisms, educational methods, apostolic approaches and goals, lived in a community of faith, hope and charity, in obedience to Christ and to the Pastors of the Church. In practice, "they must work as true instruments of communion in the Church, showing a sincere and effective mutual collaboration in facing the challenges of the new evangelization, as well as an indispensable harmony with the objectives determined by the Bishops, successors of the Apostles, in the various local Churches" (*Message to the National Meeting of Lay Movements,* Lisbon, 28 March 2000).

6. I know the efforts your Dioceses are making to reach these objectives. One of the factors to

stress in your *thinking with the Church* is the fact that *the presence of new realities called into being by the Spirit, the movements and associations in your particular Churches,* helps your "responsible participation ... in the Church's mission of carrying forward the Gospel of Christ, the source of hope for humanity and the renewal of society" (cf. *Christifideles laici,* n. 29).

There is sometimes a risk of a blurring or shortsighted view of the transcendent value that the phenomenon of community life is acquiring in the Church. I have had the opportunity to assert that there is an ecclesiological motive "based on ecclesiology, as the Second Vatican Council clearly acknowledged in referring to the group apostolate as a "*sign of communion and of unity of the Church of Christ*"; and this is not all: that great gathering also highlighted what it chose to describe as a "true and proper right ... to found and run such associations and to join those already existing" (*ibid.,* n. 29).

The criteria of ecclesiality, of course, for the appropriate integration of these new realities, must always be respected and analyzed by diocesan authority, in accord with the pastoral needs not only of the particular Church, but also of the universal Church (cf. *ibid.,* n. 30). A more solid communion with their Pastors is certainly asked of all the Churches, since "no charism dispenses a person from reference and submission to the Pastors of the Church" (*ibid.,* n. 24); on the other hand, they must have a capacity for discernment, to judge the authenticity of the path they must take in the diocesan context. It is not impossible to imagine complementary structures, which could bring about an organic convergence of priests and lay people. In this way an effort should be made to reach the goals that are truly laid out in diocesan pastoral plans, and, in the ultimate analysis, in the mind of the Successor of Peter and in the Magisterium, correctly applied. It is essential, however, to avoid the danger of the dispersion of vital forces with objectives that differ from the "concern for all the churches" (II Cor 11,28). In this sense, I would like to call your attention to the desire expressed in some sectors to transform into a Conference the National Council of the Laity that would be a parallel organism to the National Bishops' Conference of Brazil. To claim to create an autonomous organism that would be representative of the laity without referring to the hierarchical communion with the Bishops, constitutes an ecclesiological error with serious and obvious implications. I am sure you will not delay in guiding the laity away from such initiatives.

7. Furthermore, as we know, the fundamental role of the laity in the Church's mission was stressed by the Second Vatican Council and by many post-conciliar documents.

As we read in *Lumen gentium,* lay people "have, as living members, the vocation of applying to the building up of the Church ... all the powers which they have received..." (*Lumen gentium,* n. 33), to spread the Church among individuals and peoples. Even more explicit and categorical is the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, which says: "The laity have an active part of their own in the life and action of the Church" (*Apostolicam actuositatem,* n. 10). Therefore their apostolic activity is not optional but a specific duty, which is the task of each one of the faithful, for the

simple reason that he has been baptized. They should all "have a lively consciousness of their own responsibility for the world, they should foster within themselves a truly Catholic spirit, they should spend themselves in the work of the Gospel" (*Ad gentes,* n. 36). The mission is one, but the ways of carrying it out differ, according to the gifts the Spirit has bestowed upon the various members of the Church. Lay people's action is indispensable, if the Church is to be considered truly built up, alive and functional at every level, thus becoming fully a sign of Christ's presence among men. This presupposes a mature laity, in full communion with the hierarchy, committed to bringing the Gospel to the different situations of society.

The task of Pastors consists in stimulating and guiding their people toward the same true evangelizing and missionary mandate that the Redeemer passed on to his Church. As masters of the faith, they will reinforce the respect of their flock for the canon law of the Church, seeking to guide them also in the observance of the State laws, since "they are not distinguished from other people by country, by language or by political organization" (*Letter to Diognetus,* 5: *PG* 2, 1173), but by their Christian faith and hope and the purity of their life.

8. A persevering and attentive youth ministry which is called to witness to the Christian values in the new millennium is particularly necessary. It is not a commonplace to say, once again, that young people are the future of humanity. Concern for their human and Christian maturity is a precious investment for the good of the Church and of society. Hence the conviction that "youth ministry must be one of the primary concerns of Pastors and communities" (*Ecclesia in America,* n. 47).

As we know, Brazilian youth are a feature of the country's life not only because of their number, but also because of the influence on social life that they exercise. In addition to the thorny problem of caring for minors deprived of their dignity and innocence, there are problems linked to their insertion into the job market, the increase in juvenile delinquency, which is largely conditioned by the situation of endemic poverty and the lack of a family stability and the harmful impact of some of the media, internal migration in the quest for better living conditions in the larger cities and the worrying involvement of young people in the world of drugs and prostitution, are all factors that continue to be of primary concern.

Young people are not indifferent to what the Christian faith teaches about human life and destiny. In our time, although ideologies abound and they have many champions who remain fixed in their errors, mingled with the superficial attitudes there are high aspirations, heroism as well as cowardice, idealism as well as deception and people are dreaming of a new world that is more just and more human. "If Christ", therefore, "is presented to young people as he really is, they experience him as an answer that is convincing and they can accept this message even when it is demanding and bears the mark of the Cross" (*Novo Millennio ineunte,* n. 9).

9. Before ending this fraternal meeting, I address a special thought to the deceased bishops in the

form of a prayer that God in his mercy will repay them with the eternal reward of his glory. At the same time, I address a word of deep appreciation and brotherhood to the bishops who retired from active service in the dioceses during this long five-year period. I renew my gratitude to them here; with their presence and example of faith and holiness, they continue to be a true blessing for the pilgrim Church. May the Holy Spirit grant an abundance of his consolations to them all!

May Blessed Mary, our Mother, protect you on your journey through life and help you in the difficulties of your ministry. With these vows, I cordially impart to each one of you my Apostolic Blessing, which I extend to your priests and co-workers, the deacons and the religious families, the seminarians and all the faithful of your dioceses.

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