



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF BELARUS
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT***

Monday, 10 February 2003

1. *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another"* (Jn 13,34). May these words that Jesus left as a testament to the Apostles in the Upper Room never cease to echo in your hearts, dear and venerable Brothers in the Episcopate!

Welcome to the house of Peter! With affection, I embrace each of you. I especially greet you, Your Eminence, Pastor of the Metropolitan See of Minsk-Mohilev, and I thank you cordially for your words on behalf of your confreres, and of the entire Catholic people of Belarus. I greet you, beloved Pastors of Grodno, Pinsk and Vitebsk. I also send my affectionate greetings to the small but fervent Byzantine-rite Catholic community, the heir of St Josaphat's mission, and I greet the Most Reverend Apostolic Visitor *ad nutum Sanctae Sedis* who daily cares for it.

The love of Christ unites us; it is his love that should permeate our lives and our pastoral service, stimulating us to renew our fidelity to the Gospel and to tend to a more generous dedication to the apostolic mission that the Lord has entrusted to us.

2. I still cherish the memory of our meeting in April 1997. It was a cause of deep joy to find out about the springtime of ecclesial life in your country, after the winter of violent persecution that had lasted for several decades. At the time the effects of the systematic imposition of atheism on your peoples, especially youth, of the almost total demolition of ecclesiastical structures and the forced closing of places of Christian formation were visible. Thanks be to God, that bitter season is over, and for several years, a gradual and encouraging revival is underway.

In the past quinquennium, the celebration of the Synods for the Archdiocese of Minsk and for the

Dioceses of Pinsk and Vitebsk has given you the opportunity to define your pastoral priorities as you drew up the best apostolic plans to deal with the many needs of the territory. This time you have come to report the fruits of your generous pastoral work, and with you I thank the Lord, who is always merciful and provident.

3. Now you must plan for the future. The first priority is the family, that, even in Belarus, unfortunately is passing through a serious and profound crisis. The first victims of this situation are the children, who risk bearing the consequences for the rest of their lives. I would like to repeat, for your comfort and encouragement, what I said to the many families meeting in Manila last 25 January for the Fourth World Meeting of Families. It is necessary to witness with consistent conviction to the truth about the family, founded on marriage. It is a great good, necessary for the life, development and future of humanity. Transmit to the families of Belarus the message I entrusted to the whole world: *Make the Gospel the guiding principle of your families, and make your families a page of the Gospel written for our time* (Address to the Fourth World Meeting of Families in Manila, via satellite TV, n. 6; ORE, 29 January 2003, p. 7).

4. Your country has almost 10 million inhabitants, a large percentage of whom live in the cities. Belarus, if it is the nation that has suffered the least from the changes of the post-Soviet period, is also the one in which the process of reintegration into the vast context of the European continent has been slow to take place. The consequences of this delay have held back its economic restructuring and, especially in rural areas poverty is advancing. The concentration of people in the urban centres entails a great exertion for the Church to be present. This is especially true in the capital, Minsk, where now 20% of the population live.

Among your priorities, you place the young people who have flocked to the cities looking for work. The unprecedented demographic crisis that affects your country is also a powerful challenge for the proclamation of the "*Gospel of life*", and the phenomena of marginalization, including an alcoholism that has lately become worse, await urgent and effective responses. Although she is the Church of a minority in your country, the Catholic Church is striving to address all these problems with the means and structures at her disposal. I encourage you, dear friends, to continue on this path and I would like to make the most of this opportunity to thank the Catholic organizations of other nations, especially Italy and Germany, who offer you their support and collaboration.

5. "*The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few*" (Mt 9,37).

Before the huge amount of work to be done, this word of Jesus spontaneously comes to mind. What is to be done? The answer comes to us from the Gospel: "*Pray therefore*", Christ adds, "*the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest*" (v. 38). Prayer comes first. It is necessary to redouble the prayer for divine help and to teach the faithful to make prayer a fundamental activity in the midst of their daily occupations. The work you have begun of translating the sacred

texts, especially the Roman Missal, into Belarusian, will be a great help.

In addition to prayer, I recall your endeavour for the formation of candidates for the priesthood and for the consecrated life, especially at the two major seminaries of Grodno and Pinsk, and I also want to emphasize the necessary attention that must be given to priests who have the care of souls.

The collaboration of clergy and religious coming from neighbouring Poland is now essential and will certainly help consolidate the Catholic community in your country.

Finally, continue the ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox Church. In your country, the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church have always lived together, and many families are mixed confessionally and, for this reason, they also need help from the Catholic Church. May the Lord continue to guide your steps in the pursuit of reciprocal respect and mutual cooperation.

This year is the 380th anniversary of the martyrdom of St Josephat, Archbishop of Polotsk, whose blood sanctified the land of Belarus. May the memory of his martyrdom be for all the faithful a source of fidelity to Christ and to his Holy Church.

7. I entrust all of you to Mary, the *Theotokos*. I ask her to protect you, venerable and beloved Brothers, and your closest collaborators, the priests, and men and women religious, seminarians and lay people who are actively involved in the apostolate, and the whole Catholic community who live in Belarus. May she watch over each one, along with your holy Patrons. For my part, I assure you of my daily remembrance in prayer as I cordially bless you.