



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF THE SYRO MALABAR CHURCH OF INDIA ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

Tuesday, 13 May 2003

Your Eminence, Venerable Major Archbishop,

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. "Peace be with you!" (Jn 20:26). In this Easter Season it is fitting that I greet you, the Bishops of the Syro Malabar Church, with the words our Risen Lord used to comfort your father in faith, Saint Thomas. Indeed the origins of your Church are directly linked with the dawn of Christianity and the missionary efforts of the Apostles. In a way, your journeying here to meet me reunites the Apostles Peter and Thomas in the joy of the Resurrection as we join in proclaiming to the beloved people of India "an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled and unfading" (1 *Peter* 1:4). In a special way I greet Your Eminence, Cardinal Varkey Viathyathil, Major Archbishop of the Syro-Malabar Church, and I wish to thank you for the greetings and sentiments you have conveyed on behalf of the episcopate, clergy and faithful of the whole Syro-Malabar Church.

2. The Liturgy of the Syro-Malabar Church, for centuries a part of India's rich and varied culture, is the most vivid expression of your peoples identity. The celebration of the Eucharistic Mystery in the Syro-Malabar Rite has played a vital part in moulding the experience of faith in India (cf. *Ecclesia in Asia*, 27). Since "the Eucharist, as Christ's saving presence in the community of the faithful and its spiritual food, is the most precious possession which the Church can have in her journey through history" (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 9), I exhort you to guard and renew this treasure with great care, never allowing it to be used as a source of division. Gathering round the altar in "the fullness of him who fills all in all" (*Eph* 1:23) not only defines you as a Eucharistic people, but is also a source of reconciliation helping to overcome obstacles which can hinder the journey toward unity of mind and purpose. As the primary custodians of the liturgy, you are called at all times to be vigilant to protect against unwarranted experimentation by individual priests which violate the integrity of the liturgy itself and can also cause great harm to the faithful (cf. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 10).

I encourage you in your efforts to renew your "ritual patrimony" in the light of the council documents, with particular

attention given to *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, and in the context of *Code of Canon Law of the Eastern Churches* and my own Apostolic Letter *Oriente Lumen*. I am certain that with prudence, patience and proper catechesis this renewal process will bear abundant fruit. The many positive results already achieved by your efforts make this task less daunting and, in fact, will be a source of future strength. I encourage you to continue this essential work so that the liturgy will not merely be studied but also be celebrated in all its integrity and beauty.

3. In a similar fashion, constant commitment to fraternal charity and cooperation is required for the successful functioning of a Synod of Bishops. Here, I commend your unwavering dedication to this shared journey: a sign of strength, confidence and unity among the Syro-Malabar Bishops and "a particularly eloquent way of living and manifesting the mystery of the Church as Communion" (cf. *Address to the Synod of Bishops of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 8 January 1996, 4). The Synod, in fact, is one of the most noble expressions of affective collegiality between bishops and is a forum well-suited for discussing serious matters of faith and society in order to find solutions to the challenges that face the Syro-Malabar community (cf. *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, 4). Maintaining this necessary unity requires sacrifice and humility. Only through concerted mutual effort can you "sustain common works that intend to promote more expeditiously the good of religion, to protect more effectively ecclesiastical discipline, and also to foster more harmoniously the unity of all Christians" (cf. *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium*, Canon 84).

4. The issue of the pastoral care of Oriental Catholics in India and abroad continues to be of concern to the Catholic Bishops Conference of India and to the Syro-Malabar Synod. Here, I wish to emphasize the "urgent need to overcome the fears and misunderstandings which appear at times between the Eastern Churches and the Latin Church... especially with regard to the pastoral care of their people also outside their own territory" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 27). It is heartening to see the strides you have already made in attempting to find a solution to this matter.

I am certain that you will continue to work closely with your Brother Bishops of the Latin Rite and the Holy See to ensure that Syro-Malabars throughout India and the world receive the spiritual support they deserve in strict respect for canonical dispositions which are, as we know, appropriate means for the preservation of ecclesial communion (cf. *Christus Dominus*, 23; *Codex Iuris Canonici*, Canon 383 §2; *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium*, Canon 916 §4). It is necessary that clear distinctions be made between the work of evangelization and that of the pastoral care of Eastern Catholics. This must always be done with respect towards the local bishops, who are placed by the Holy Spirit to govern the holy Church of God in union with the Roman Pontiff, the Pastor of the Universal Church.

5. Charity urges every Christian to go forth proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth. As the Apostle says, "For if I preach the Gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor 9:16).

Evangelization lies at the heart of the Christian faith. India, blessed with so many different cultures, is a land in which the people yearn for God; this makes your distinctly Indian liturgy an excellent way of evangelization (cf. *Ecclesia in Asia*, 22).

Authentic evangelization is sensitive to local culture and custom, always respecting the "inalienable right" of each and every person to religious freedom. Here the principle remains valid: "The Church proposes, she imposes nothing" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 39). Therefore, in your relations with your brothers and sisters of other religions, I encourage you to

"strive to discern and welcome whatever is good and holy in one another, so that together you can acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral truths which alone guarantee the world's future" (cf. *Address to Religious Leaders in India*, 7 November 1999, 3). This openness, however, can never diminish the obligation to proclaim Jesus Christ as "the way, and the truth and the life" (*Jn* 14:6). For the Incarnation of our Lord enriches all human values, enabling them to bear new and better fruit.

6. I join you in giving thanks that your Eparchies have been blessed with so many priests and Religious. To all of them I send the assurance of my prayers for the success of their ministry and for their lasting fidelity to their religious vocation. The burden of your pastoral mission could not be fulfilled without the clergy, your co-workers in the sacred ministry. Your necessary reliance on your priests compels you to foster a strong bond with them. They are your sons and friends. As their father and confidant, you must be ever "ready to listen to them and cultivate an atmosphere of easy familiarity with them, thus facilitating the pastoral work of the entire Diocese" (*Christus Dominus*, 16).

Likewise, the Religious in your care are members of your family. The witness borne by so many men and women consecrated to lives of chastity, poverty and obedience stands as a true sign of contradiction in a nation which is becoming increasingly secularized. "In a world in which the sense of God's presence is often diminished, consecrated persons need to bear convincing prophetic witness to the primacy of God and to eternal life" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 44).

The Bishop should assist in assuring that candidates for religious life are equipped to meet this challenge through appropriate spiritual and theological preparation. I am confident that you will encourage the Religious in your Eparchies to continue to revise, refine and improve their programmes of formation so that they can meet the specific needs of the Syro-Malabar community.

7. The *ad Limina* visit offers you an opportunity, as Pastors of Particular Churches, to share with me a view of how the Holy Spirit is at work in your Eparchies. In fraternal union with your Venerable Major Archbishop, you have shared the challenges and accomplishments which mark the Syro-Malabar Church and its faithful members as they daily strive to fulfil their baptismal promises. In this year of the Rosary, I commend you, your clergy, religious and laity to the protection of Our Blessed Lady, and I impart to you my Apostolic Blessing.