



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE ECCLESIASTICAL PROVINCES
OF LYONS AND CLERMONT (FRANCE)
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT** *Saturday, 7 February 2004*

*Your Eminence,
Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. I greet you with joy, Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Lyons and Clermont, at the end of your *ad limina* visit. Praying together at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul is always an important moment of spiritual replenishment; it revives in us an awareness of the irreplaceable value of Christian witness, sometimes even to the point of martyrdom, and of the apostolic roots of our faith. It is also a time of fraternal sharing and work that strengthens our sense of Church, thanks to the meetings with the Successor of Peter, who guarantees ecclesial communion, and with the different Dicasteries. I would like to welcome in particular the many new Bishops in your group, and I cordially thank Cardinal Philippe Barbarin, Archbishop of Lyons and Primate of the Gauls who has presented to me on your behalf the two regions and some of your pastoral concerns. You describe a situation that is often difficult due to the lack of pastors and the secular attitude while your Dioceses are striving courageously to prepare for the future.

2. Today I would like to reflect with you on *the life of the diocesan Church*. Since the previous *ad limina* visits of the Bishops of France in 1997, many Dioceses have thought seriously about the life and role of the parishes. This became necessary due to demographic development and growing urbanization, as well as to the shortage of priests, whose scarcity will be felt even more in the years to come. In many Dioceses, this work is carried out in the context of a diocesan synod; in others, what might be called a "synodal process" has been started, in all cases seeking the broad involvement of Pastors and faithful to review the parish's place in the life of the Church, including its future prospects. In most cases, the Bishop subsequently decided to re-organize the pastoral structure of his whole Diocese, either by creating new, fewer and better parishes, or by regrouping the existing ones into more consistent groups to serve better the needs of evangelization.

3. This pastoral reflection, far from being confined to the administrative reform and to the parish boundaries, has made possible a real process of *continuing formation and catechesis* with the faithful, enabling them to take on with greater awareness the riches of parish life; in other words, the three important missions of the Church: the prophetic mission, marked by the responsibility to proclaim the Good News of salvation to all, which the Lord himself entrusted to the Church; the priestly mission, which consists in sharing in the one priesthood of Christ through the celebration of the divine mysteries; and lastly, the royal mission, which is expressed in service to all in the manner of Jesus Christ.

Thus, the faithful have been able to evaluate together the way in which parishes has been carrying out their tasks, learning to coordinate them and acquiring a better grasp of what creates unity.

Indeed, it is essential for the faithful to realize that children's catechesis, the life of prayer and serving the sick are not simply activities entrusted to "specialists" or volunteers, but are fundamental to the Christian mission and consequently, to the common good, as St Paul so aptly put it when comparing the Church to the body (cf. I Cor 12: 12-28). Every Ecclesial Community, and particularly the parish that is the basic cell of diocesan Church life, must proclaim the Gospel, celebrate the worship that is due to God and serve as Christ did.

It is also important to ensure that the parish community expresses the diversity of its members and the variety of their charisms, and be open to the life of associations or movements. It will then become a living expression of ecclesial communion that puts the possessions of each one at the service of all (cf. Acts 4: 32), and never withdraws into itself. Thus, the faithful will show their interest in parochial communion and will feel that they belong to the Diocese as well as to the whole Church (cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 529 2).

4. For the faithful to become aware of the *true identity of the parish*, which is not merely a geographical territory or an administrative division but rather a fundamental Ecclesial Community, implies rediscovering the real identity of the Diocese. Nor is the Diocese merely an administrative district; it is first and foremost the expression of an ecclesial reality: the Diocesan Church, "a section of the People of God entrusted to a Bishop to be guided by him with the assistance of his clergy" (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 11). Consequently, the Diocese is a living entity, a human and spiritual reality, a family of communities made up of the parishes and other ecclesial initiatives in the area.

I would like to stress the importance of this rediscovery of the Church's true nature. She is neither an administration nor an enterprise, but is primarily the expression of a spiritual reality made up of men and women, called by God's grace to become sons and daughters of God, who have entered into a new brotherhood through Baptism which has incorporated them into Christ.

5. Rediscovery of the sacramental nature of the Church, which is also a "mission on behalf of communion" (*Christifideles Laici*, n. 32) must therefore be expressed in a new dynamic that is

totally geared to *evangelization*. Your Dioceses have understood this well by choosing a missionary topic for their synodal reflection, such as the pastoral reorganization of the Diocese, the evangelization of young people or the pastoral approach to the sacraments. Concentrating everyone's energy on achieving this goal will make it easier to identify the concrete pastoral priorities and to implement them in the area with the help of all pastoral workers. Likewise, working together over a long period on the critical issue of the future of the Christian community enables priests and lay people to understand one another more deeply, to appreciate the implications and specific role of each of them in the life of the Church and to perceive more clearly that ecclesial communion favours respect for differences and their complementarities, as well as their common service to Christ and to our brethren in the one faith.

I rejoice with you in the diocesan meetings you have been able to organize, especially the youth gatherings to which, with the whole diocesan Church, you pay special attention. They make it possible to perceive more clearly the meaning of Church-communion, since individuals from different groups, different places and with different sensibilities are called to meet one another in order to journey forward together, exactly as the meaning of the word "synod" demonstrates. I ardently hope for an ever more intense unity and adherence to the Pastors responsible for leading the flock. In this regard, I know that you take care to welcome those groups and priests whose outlook is more traditional, and you will certainly be able to develop this. It is also the task of the members of more traditional communities to be open to the realities and sensibilities of the local Churches and to take a more and more active part in diocesan life, in accordance with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Like all their brother priests, the priests of these communities have a specific pastoral role to play among the faithful by their example of real filial communion with the Bishop and the universal Church, and by being ready to respond to the call of mission.

To be faithful to the meaning of mission is vital for the Church and the expression of "her deepest identity" (cf. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 14). Obviously, remodelling our Churches' pastoral tools requires more than adapting the size of the parish territory. It is also necessary to be open to other dimensions, paying heed above all to the new social phenomena and to all the "modern equivalents of the Areopagus" (*Redemptoris Missio*, n. 37). To achieve this, some Dioceses have decided to combine their apostolic forces by putting priests available for this mission at the service of the Dioceses with the fewest priests. I am pleased with this initiative and hope that it will be copied elsewhere, possibly in different forms and perhaps in the context of the new Provinces or wherever the acute disparity of means risks penalizing certain Dioceses. May all priests who receive such requests make themselves available!

6. In your reports, you express the importance you attach to the solemn celebration of the liturgy in the Cathedral Church around the Bishop and his priests and with many of the faithful on several occasions throughout the year, such as the Chrism Mass or at the time of Ordinations. The liturgy thus becomes the "principal manifestation of the Church" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 41), in

which all the People of God gather in the place that represents the visible communion of the diocesan Church; they acquire a deeper awareness of her identity, rediscovering her sacramental source that is Christ the Lord, the Word made flesh, whose Spirit acts through the ministry of Pastors and in the first place of the Bishop. The ecclesial Body thereby shows the diversity of its members and at the same time the bonds that they have with one another and with the Bishop, the servant of communion among them all.

The assurance that Christian life is rooted in the Eucharistic mystery, "source and summit of the life of the Church", according to the beautiful description of the Council Fathers (cf. *ibid.*, n. 10), brings more and more of the faithful to work actively with the ordained ministers in the preparation and celebration of the liturgy, to highlight the beauty of Christian worship that is ordered "for the glory of God and the salvation of the world", as the liturgy of Mass says.

7. To serve as Christ served is the royal mission of every baptized person and every Ecclesial Community which the Diocese must therefore express in practice. In a certain way, *the ministry of permanent deacons* honours this duty. Indeed, many deacons receive a mission that has something to do with the exercise of charity, when given the responsibility of chaplaincies in the world of health care or of prisons, or at the service of charitable institutions. However, it is the *lay faithful* who play the principal role in this ecclesial mission of service through their daily witness to the Gospel at work and in their various duties in the world. In political and social life, in the many spheres of economic activity and in cultural action, they toil in the heart of society to promote relations between people that respect and honour the dignity of every person in all his or her dimensions. They also express their sense of justice and solidarity with the least privileged at local, national and international levels, especially by supporting missionary works. French Catholics also have *a long missionary tradition*. Despite the current forms of poverty, may they not forget the countries to which their predecessors took the Gospel! To be engaged in the foreign mission, far from impoverishing a parish or Diocese, will give it in return the new strength that comes from the sharing of gifts.

8. At the end of our meeting at which I have dealt with the situations that constitute your daily work and fill your prayers as Pastors, I cannot forget all your collaborators. I am thinking first of all of the Vicars General, more directly associated with the exercise of your ministry and who daily travel over the roads of the Dioceses to meet the needs of parishes, their Pastors and their faithful; and of the Episcopal Vicars who also work to bring the pastoral action of the Bishop closer to everyone. I am also thinking of the people who work in the Diocesan Curia at the service of the diocesan community, helping to administer its assets and to improve the exercise of solidarity with a more just and efficient sharing of resources, or again, to inform on matters of justice. Many Dioceses have recently opened a "diocesan house" for movements and services to improve the collaboration between them and simply to enable people to meet, which the media - that is, the diocesan radio and press - do as well. Through you, dear Brother Bishops, I would like to encourage all who work in these diocesan institutions and are thus carrying out a service to the

Church, whose missionary dimension escapes no one. May they receive warm thanks!

On your return to your Dioceses to take up the service the Lord has entrusted to you with courage and spiritual determination, be sure to tell all the baptized of the Pope's support and encouragement! May all the faithful make a point of sharing fully in the life of their respective Dioceses. They will thereby build bonds of communion with one another, without forgetting to be open to the other Churches and to constantly foster their attachment to the universal Church by praying also for the Pope and the fulfilment of his ministry! As the Successor of Peter, I have received the special mission to strengthen my brethren in the faith (cf. Lk 22: 32) and to serve communion among all the Bishops and faithful. Pleased once again to put my ministry at your service, entrusting you to the motherly intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I wholeheartedly impart to you and to all your faithful an affectionate Apostolic Blessing.