



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE FIFTH GROUP OF FRENCH BISHOPS
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Friday, 30 January 2004

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. At the end of your *ad limina* visit, a time of grace in your episcopal ministry, I joyfully welcome you who are in charge of the pastoral care of the Catholic Church in the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Dijon and Tours and the Prelature of the Mission of France. I am affectionately thinking of Archbishop Michel Coloni of Dijon, who is unable to be here this morning. By coming on pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul you develop within you the apostolic enthusiasm that inspired them. Meeting the Bishop of Rome and his collaborators enables you to experience communion with the Successor of Peter, and through him with the universal Church. Sustained by the prayer of the saints who left their mark on the history and spirituality of your regions, especially St Martin and Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity, may you find the strength to guide the People of God entrusted to you on the paths of holiness and brotherhood with ever greater pastoral wisdom! I thank Archbishop André Vingt-Trois of Tours for his cordial greetings and for sharing your hopes and concerns with me. May the new relations between Dioceses created on the occasion of the sub-division of the Ecclesiastical Provinces contribute to developing your bonds of unity so that together you may face the challenges of the new evangelization!

2. Your quinquennial reports reveal your attention to the vocation and mission of lay people in the current circumstances of the Church. *Many lay persons serve the Church generously, despite their ever shrinking numbers.* Christian communities are gradually aging: the age group between 25 and 45 is barely represented in the communities; the difficulty in assuring the replacement of dependable Christians to exercise responsibility in the Church is already very real. *Yet you note some signs of hope.* These include the demand for lay people eager to acquire a sound philosophical, theological, spiritual or pastoral training to serve the Church and the world better;

the search for ever greater consistency between the faith and its expression in daily life; the concern for a Christian witness that is rooted in an authentic spiritual life; the recovery of the desire for studying Scripture and meditating on the Word; the growing sense of responsibility and commitment to justice and solidarity in order to meet new perplexing situations. I ask all Pastors to base any new initiatives on the aspirations of the People of God, even if at the start they involve only a few persons, in the certainty that the faithful who have rediscovered Christ will present the Gospel in a credible way to our contemporaries, inviting them to join them as the Apostle Philip invited Nathaniel: "Come and see" (Jn 1: 46).

You mention the *fruits that the Great Jubilee of the Incarnation has borne in the Dioceses and parish communities*, calling Christians to draw on the grace of their Baptism, the starting point of every believer's mission. "We need to 'set out anew from Christ', with the zeal of Pentecost, with renewed enthusiasm. To set out from him above all in a daily commitment to holiness, with an attitude of prayer and of listening to his Word. To set out from him in order to testify to his Love by living a Christian life marked by communion, charity and witness before the world" (*Homily*, 6 January 2001, n. 8; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition [ORE], 10 January 2001, p. 2). It is your task to implement this programme fully so that the Christian community may put out into the deep, allowing itself to be evangelized and questioning the quality and visibility of its witness.

3. To adapt pastoral structures to the needs of the mission, *your Dioceses have been effectually remodelled*. The perspective of the ecclesiology of communion, whose purpose is to build up the Church as a house and school of communion, has partly dictated your pastoral plans. The fall in the number of priests is not the only reason for the pastoral "re-dimensioning" that has proven necessary. In carrying it out, you have taken account of the reduced numbers in the communities.

This has had a positive effect: it has enabled lay people to take an active part in the dynamics of their community and to become aware of the prophetic, royal and priestly dimensions of their Baptism. Many have willingly agreed to engage in parish life under the leadership of their Pastor and with respect for the ordained ministry, and they have put themselves at the service of evangelization as well as prayer and charity. I know of the apostolic courage that motivates them, and that they must come to grips with the pervading atmosphere of indifference and scepticism. Give them the affectionate greetings of the Successor of Peter who accompanies them in his daily prayers.

Take care to see that a fruitful interaction links their commitments as lay people in Christian communities to the prophetic dimension of their witness in the world, recalling that they have an important responsibility "for evangelizing culture, making the power of the Gospel part of the life of the family, the workplace, the mass media, sports and leisure, and for promoting Christian values in society and public life, both national and international" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Gregis*, n. 51). If this witness is to be productive, it is important that it meet with spiritual support in the parishes and associations of the faithful. May everyone, therefore, in the legitimate

diversity of ecclesial sensibilities, be constantly concerned to play a full part in the life of the Diocese and parish and to live in communion with the diocesan Bishop. In this way - and it is the Bishop's task to see to it - it will be possible to achieve communion around the Successors of the Apostles.

Please convey my fervent greetings to all the committed lay faithful working in movements and who serve the Church, and especially to those who work in the contexts of solidarity and the promotion of justice. Their presence in society's wounded areas is a sign of the Church's closeness and involvement with people who are sick, marginalized, lonely or in a precarious situation. By coordinating their activities better and better, they will ceaselessly remind Christian communities of their common need for a continuous active presence beside every suffering person (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, n. 53).

4. I give thanks with you for the young people and adults who are discovering or rediscovering Christ and who knock at the Church's door because they are asking themselves about faith and about the meaning of their life or have encountered witnesses. Take great care to accompany these people and help them on their way. You should also take pains to accustom Christian communities to accepting catechumens or those who have regained their faith, and support them after their Baptism. They are a stimulating invitation to the Church, whose traditions, experience and practices they must assimilate. Through you, I thank the teams of catechists for their important service. *This catechumenal zeal* and likewise the requests presented by people on the occasion of an important milestone in their family life - a baptism, a marriage or a funeral - *call Christian communities to develop a suitable pastoral programme for Christian initiation*. The quality of acceptance and brotherhood to be found in the Church is an evangelizing potential for today's men and women. In this spirit, it is important that parish groups do not cloud the Church's visibility in small towns, those basic social units, especially in rural areas. They should offer people the possibility of joyful celebrations of the Eucharist that edify the community and provide the apostolic enthusiasm that it needs.

It is evident in the communities that even for committed Christians, Sunday Mass is not given sufficient importance. *Pastors, therefore, should make a point of forcefully and clearly reminding the faithful*, especially those responsible for catechesis, youth service or chaplaincies, of *the meaning of the Sunday obligation and the need to take part in the Sunday Eucharist*, which can never be a mere option amid many others. Indeed, to truly follow Christ, to evangelize, to serve the Lord, it is right to lead a consistent and responsible life in conformity with the precepts of the Church and to be convinced of the crucial importance of participating in the Eucharistic banquet with the whole community (cf. Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, nn. 46-49).

5. Your quinquennial reports show your concern to present to lay people the *means to acquiring an ever deeper spiritual and theological formation*, especially by setting up theological and spiritual formation centres in several Dioceses or the region. These places help them to deepen their faith

and acquire a pastoral training that will equip them to assume responsibility in the Church. This formation must likewise lead the faithful to a more intense sacramental practice and prayer life. In the religious context, the modern world and scientific breakthroughs require that Pastors and faithful receive a formation which enables them to account for the Christian mystery and the life that Christ proposes to those who want to follow him. With a view to integrating the teaching they receive, it is important to ensure that the intellectual preparation leads each one to a personal relationship with Christ.

From this point of view, it would be correct to give *permanent formation to philosophers and theologians* who can offer Christians the intellectual foundations they need for their faith and their specific mission as committed lay people in the world. The Church also educates many young people, respecting their cultures and religious denominations, with the intention of providing high-quality teaching as she has the noble task of passing on the human, moral and spiritual values of the Gospel. I acknowledge the work carried out by individuals and educational communities deeply involved in the school and university context: teaching, catechesis or chaplaincies. Never let them forget that the most important witness for young people is a life lived daily in conformity with the Christian principles that they desire to communicate. It is up to Pastors to recall constantly this criterion of consistency.

6. *The concern to promote and guide families* is at the heart of your concerns as Pastors. The family is not one model of a relationship among others, but a type of relationship indispensable to the future of society. In fact, a society cannot be healthy if it does not foster the family ideal in order to build stable conjugal and family relationships and for a proper relationship between the generations. How should families be helped? Your Dioceses are always ready to offer the practical means to further their growth, enabling them to bear a credible witness in the Church and in society.

As some of your reports suggest, you are especially eager to offer guidance to newly-weds, enabling them to acquire the human and spiritual maturity they need for the harmonious development of their family. I am also thinking of the new generations of young people whom the Church has difficulty in reaching and who come to ask the Church *to prepare them for marriage*. I encourage the priests, deacons and faithful involved in this fine task to help them discover the profound meaning of this sacrament, as well as the tasks to which it commits them. In this way, they will present *a positive view of emotional relationships and sexuality* that will contribute to the growth of the couple and the family. As I previously asked at Sainte-Anne-d'Auray during my Pastoral Visit to France, I ask you once again to support families in their vocation to express the beauty of parenthood and nurture the culture of life (cf. *Address at Meeting with Families*, 20 September 1996, n. 7; *ORE*, 2 October 1996, p. 4).

I also recognize the *important work carried out under your supervision by the services and movements for the family apostolate*. The initiatives they promote are indispensable in helping

young families to grow in human and spiritual vitality in their homes, as well as being a practical response to the phenomenon of the break-up of families. One cannot helplessly watch the family institution disintegrate. In this context, the Church wishes to bring about a real change of mindset and behaviour, so that the positive values linked to married and family life may prevail and relationships may not be seen merely from the perspective of individualism and personal pleasure which distorts the deep meaning of human life that is primarily altruism and the gift of self. The commitment to marriage entails a certain number of tasks and responsibilities. These include maintaining and deepening the conjugal bond and caring for the children. In this spirit, it is right to offer help to parents who are the first educators of their children. Thus, they will be able, on the one hand, to deal with and solve marital crises that they may experience, and on the other, to bear witness to the young of the greatness of faithful, unique love and of the elements of a human, emotional and sexual education, challenged by the frequently destructive messages of contemporary society that give the impression that all forms of emotional conduct are acceptable, denying to human acts any moral qualification. Such an attitude is particularly harmful for young people since it involves them, at times in imprudent ways, in erroneous forms of behaviour. As we often see, these leave deep scars on their psyche, mortgaging their future outlook and commitments.

7. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, at the end of our meeting I would like to *recall the wonderful figure of Madeleine Delbr el*, the centenary of whose birth we are celebrating. She took part in the missionary adventure of the Church in France during the 20th century, in particular in the foundation of the Mission of France and its seminary at Lisieux. May her shining witness help all the faithful, united with their Pastors, to put down roots in ordinary life and in the different cultures and to make the newness and power of the Gospel penetrate them through a life that is increasingly fraternal! In keeping alive in their hearts and lives their ecclesial consciousness, which is "ever mindful of what it means to be members of the Church of Jesus Christ, participants in her mystery of communion and in her dynamism in mission and the apostolate" (*Christifideles Laici*, n. 64), the faithful will be able to devote themselves to serving their brethren. I entrust you to Our Lady and I impart to you yourselves, to the priests, deacons, men and women religious and all the lay people of your Dioceses, an affectionate Apostolic Blessing.