



The Holy See

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

Friday, 12 March 2004

Your Eminence,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I am happy to welcome you, Bishops of The Netherlands who have come to Rome as pilgrims to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, to live a beautiful experience of fraternal communion with the Successor of Peter and among yourselves. I hope that you will find support and renewed dynamism in this visit so that you may always assume the responsibility for the apostolic ministry in your Dioceses with courage and confidence. I thank Cardinal Simonis for his words to me, sharing your concerns as Pastors and your hopes for the future.

2. As your quinquennial reports emphasize, for the past 30 years your Country has been experiencing the phenomenon of *intense secularization*. This trend has very strongly affected the Catholic Church and unfortunately continues to be a feature of Dutch society, "to the extent that reference to the Gospel seems to have disappeared from certain decisions and guidelines of individuals and in public life, especially in the ethical context" (*Message for the 150th Anniversary of the Re-establishment of the Episcopal Hierarchy of The Netherlands*, 7 June 2003, n. 2). At the same time, your Dioceses and the Christian communities of which they consist have had to face a considerable, continuous decline in the number of the faithful and of Pastors, which is a cause of deep concern to you. In 1980 I had already convoked in Rome a Special Synod for the Bishops of The Netherlands to show my solicitude for your Church and to strengthen in her the bonds "of the communion of the Church, a communion at the same time local and universal" (*Homily at Mass in the Sistine Chapel for the Conclusion of the Synod of Dutch Bishops*, 31 January 1980, n. 3; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition [ORE], 11 February 1980, p. 2). In the face of persistent difficulties, both old and new, there might be a temptation to despair or to withdraw into self, as the

disciples themselves had experienced (cf. Lk 24: 17-21). As I recently recalled (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, n. 26), it is the Word of the risen Christ that indicates our route most clearly: "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel..." (Mk 16: 15). In fact, "the Gospel of hope, received and assimilated by the Church, calls for daily proclamation and witness. This is the proper vocation of the Church in every time and place" (*Ecclesia in Europa*, n. 45).

3. *Clearly there is a need to proclaim the Good News* of Christ's love particularly to the young people who are no longer guided by reliable reference points and live in a society more and more marked by moral relativism and religious pluralism. Parishes and Catholic schools, together with families, should do their part to assure the transmission of the Christian heritage, not only by providing children and young people with the knowledge they need to assimilate and understand Catholic doctrine, but also by offering them an example through daily witness of demanding Christian life, nourished by love of God and neighbour. In this perspective, I invite Catholic teaching to maintain and strengthen its proper identity by its harmonious adaptation to the ever new needs of education in a pluralistic society, with respect for others but without sacrificing what constituted its original wealth. It is your responsibility as Pastors to watch over this, by encouraging all teachers to work along these lines.

4. *Being witnesses to Christ* by word and deed is a responsibility shared by all the baptized and implies several conditions. How can we give what we ourselves do not possess? How can we speak of Christ and make people want to know him if we are not first his disciples? To proclaim the Gospel, we all need to set out anew from Christ (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, III) and to draw our apostolic energy from the source of living water which is Christ himself. I am delighted to know that your parish communities are rediscovering the Sunday Eucharist as the basis and the heart of their Christian life. By tending the beauty of the liturgical celebration and seeking to respect faithfully the liturgical norms established by the Church, they are accepting the teachings of the Word transmitted and actualized by the Pastors of the Church, and are nourished with the Bread of Life. As I reminded the whole Church: "The Eucharistic Sacrifice, while always offered in a particular community, is never a celebration of that community alone.... From this it follows that a truly Eucharistic community cannot be closed in upon itself, as though it were somehow self-sufficient; rather, it must persevere in harmony with every other Catholic community. The ecclesial communion of the Eucharistic assembly is a communion with its own Bishop and with the Roman Pontiff" (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 39).

5. To bring the Church in The Netherlands better into line with the needs of the mission, you have courageously undertaken to adapt the ecclesial institutions, especially by reorganizing the services of your Bishops' Conference and by regrouping the parishes in your Dioceses into coherent units. Take care that this up-dating is not limited to a formal restructuring but is an opportunity to rediscover the essential role of the parish and the mission of the faithful of whom it consists, for a better mobilization of one and all with a view to Gospel proclamation. I ask you to offer the lay faithful the means to nourish their faith through a stronger sacramental life, frequent reading of the

Word of God and study of the teachings that the Magisterium offers to everyone. I know that many of the faithful are voluntarily serving the Christian community in catechesis, in youth chaplaincies, in service to the sick. A large number carry out a mission entrusted to them by the Bishop for a specific period, working in harmony with the priests and deacons. The Church rejoices in this, for she needs everyone's help in order to carry out her mission. As Bishops, may you succeed in attracting and training true leaders. Show them your support, especially by offering them appropriate formation and spiritual guidance. May these persons feel that they are sent and backed by the diocesan Church, with respect for differences and for the necessary complementarity of roles within the Christian flock whose shepherd is the Bishop (cf. I Cor 12: 12-30)! In many of your parishes today, the congregation has acquired a more cosmopolitan look due to the presence of immigrant faithful. I encourage you to welcome them as brothers and sisters so that they may contribute their own stone to the common building by putting their enthusiasm at the service of all, and so that this exchange of gifts, always an enrichment to the Church, may revive among you the awareness of Christian brotherhood.

6. You have at heart to give your communities the priests they need, despite the vocations crisis that continues to have a serious effect on your Country. To this end, you have undertaken to promote a more vigorous *vocations apostolate* in your Dioceses and to give your future pastors a high-quality human, theological, spiritual and pastoral formation. Spare no efforts in this area, even if the investment in people can seem costly to you at a time when priests are so much in demand. You are certainly preparing the future of the Church, and this mission is an absolute priority. Some Dioceses make the most of the presence of young priests who come to study from other local Churches, even on other continents, and are glad of this pastoral collaboration, this "exchange of gifts". Although it is legitimate to appreciate this sharing, we know well that each Church must strive to inspire vocations, to give herself the means for her life in Jesus Christ, by making fruitful the gifts she herself has received. I am counting first of all on the young people of your Country so that, like Peter, they will hear the Lord's call: "Do not be afraid; henceforth, you will be fishers of men" (Lk 5: 10), and respond generously. I also ask families to be places of faith and seedbeds for vocations, passing on dauntlessly the Lord's call to the young!

Young priests are scarce in your Dioceses and are often called very soon to exercise many important pastoral responsibilities. They must be accompanied in their ministry in particular by suitable programmes for permanent formation, and must be able to rely on their Bishop as a father (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, n. 47); they can also expect the support of the Christian community that welcomes them and especially in collaboration in responsibility with their lay brothers and sisters. May they all remember that whatever their mission may be, it is first and foremost a service to Christ and his Church! However, they will find strength and joy for their apostolate in love of the Lord, who never abandons his own (cf. Is 49: 15) and invites them to be with him (Mk 3: 14). Give them the means for this companionship with Christ through regular spiritual retreats, so that they may re-examine their life before God and give thanks for all they receive from him in their generous service to their brothers and sisters!

7. Do not be afraid to recall the importance of the *witness of consecrated life*. It has left a deep mark on your Country; unfortunately, the communities which live there today have aged considerably and, moreover, risk disappearing if an effort is not made to inspire new vocations. This implies parents in the home are careful to create true freedom for their children, without directing them too soon to purely social criteria of a successful career. Catholic schools must also contribute to this awakening and enable young people to discover, especially through the saints, the example of men and women who could respond to the Lord's call and witness to the beauty of a life given without reserve. This also implies that Christian communities know how to appreciate the variety and complementarity of vocations, and that the young discover that consecrated life is close to them and receptive to their questions. I urge men and women religious to live their charism with fidelity and confidence, without fearing the arrival of young religious communities or new ecclesial movements which can undoubtedly help to bring consecrated life closer and make it more visible, and also to revive the older communities.

8. Today you note among your compatriots a renewed interest in religious matters and a *new spiritual thirst* that some express, especially the younger generations. This pleases me and I urge all Pastors to be aware of these developments and to propose strong spiritual paths to the People of God. I hope that all the children of the Church, especially the lay faithful, will truly have at heart to witness to their faith, bringing the light of the Gospel to the various social milieus. May they extol the greatness of marriage and the beauty of the family in a society tempted to renounce definitive commitments for more transient forms of union! It is also important that they witness to the inalienable dignity of all human persons in the contexts of work and social relations, as well as in the ethical issues to which technological progress and financial pressures constantly give rise, and that they witness to the Christian values which have contributed to forging the Europe of today. I invite the lay faithful to acquire the human and Christian formation they need in order to take part in the debates that interest Dutch society in a spirit of dialogue, bringing to it the concern to reveal the riches of the Christian outlook on humanity and the human being's demanding call to overcome all forms of selfishness in order to live in accordance with the Gospel.

9. At the end of our meeting, I urge you to model your pastoral action ceaselessly on *Christ, the Good Shepherd* (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, n. 42). May you, who are the "source and foundation of unity" in your Dioceses (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 23), be courageous and passionate guides of your flock and never hesitate to speak, in season and out of season, to light it on its way and ensure that it walks in the faith! I offer a very special greeting to the priests and the deacons, your collaborators in the ministry, who need your initiative and enthusiasm in order to work together and weave bonds of fraternal communion among all the faithful. May they be assured of the Pope's encouragement and prayers! Over and above your current problems, do not forget the missionary tradition of your Church: the mission *ad gentes* in distant lands is also in need of workers! Christian communities of other denominations with whom you are on good terms live in your Dioceses. Continue firmly along the path of ecumenism, pursuing dialogue despite the difficulties and encouraging all possible opportunities to demonstrate our common desire for unity. May the

Catholic faithful appear in the eyes of all, and especially of the members of other religions, as peacemakers keen on a truthful dialogue and motivated by respect for the human being!

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, you have just celebrated the *150th anniversary of the re-establishment of the episcopal hierarchy in The Netherlands* as an opportunity to thank God for all the gifts you have received from him, to strengthen the bonds of fraternal communion and to mobilize yourselves with a view to the mission entrusted to the entire Church. As I entrust you to the motherly intercession of the Virgin Mary, Star of Evangelization, I impart to you as well as to the priests, deacons and all the faithful of your Dioceses, an affectionate Apostolic Blessing.