



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER PAUL VI
TO A GROUP OF BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT***

Thursday, 15 June 1978

Venerable and dear Brothers,

We welcome you all in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and embrace you in his love. In you, our brother Bishops, we wish to honor the local Churches over which you preside, and which you are called to serve in the charity of the Savior. Through you we send our greeting of joy and peace to all the faithful that make up your Dioceses: to all our sons and daughters in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, the Virgin Islands, Virginia, West Virginia, Kansas, Iowa, Missouri and Nebraska.

As we celebrate together our communion of faith and love in the unity of Christ, we are conscious of being the successors of his Apostles, Bishops of the Catholic Church, who are charged with the mission of giving witness to the Lord Jesus, and of proclaiming the testimony of his Father. In the words of Saint John: "The testimony is this: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever possesses the Son possesses life; whoever does not possess the Son of God does not possess life" (1 *Jo.* 5, 11).

Today we wish to consider the mystery of life in Jesus Christ. And since life in Jesus Christ is embodied in the Eucharist, it is about the Eucharist that we now wish to speak to you and to all the Hierarchy in America. The Eucharist is of supreme importance in our ministry as priests and Bishops, making present Christ's salvific activity. The Eucharist is of supreme relevance to our people in their Christian lives. It is of supreme effectiveness for the transformation of the world in justice, holiness and peace. Precisely, therefore, because of the intimate relationship between the Eucharist and the apostolate to which we dedicate ourselves, we wish to reflect with you on several aspects of this Sacrament, which is the Bread of life.

The Second Vatican Council has reminded all priests that the main source of their pastoral love is to be found in the Eucharistic Sacrifice (Cfr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 14). It goes on to state that “the ministry of priests is directed towards this work and is perfected in it. For their ministry, which takes its start from the Gospel proclamation, derives its power and force from the Sacrifice of Christ” (*Ibid.* 2). And then it specifies that priests fulfill their chief duty in the mystery of the Eucharistic Sacrifice (Cfr. *Ibid.* 13). For us, Brethren, as for all our collaborators in the priesthood, who have dedicated their lives in order to lead the faithful to the fullness of the Paschal Mystery, this teaching is extremely important. It gives a decisive orientation to all our activities as shepherds of God’s people, and as heralds of the Gospel of salvation, whose highest proclamation is enacted in the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

Besides determining the priorities of our own ministry and that of our priests, the teaching of the Second Vatican Council gives immense joy to the Catholic people, reminding them that because the Eucharist contains Christ himself it therefore contains “the Church’s entire spiritual wealth” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5).

A few months before the promulgation of the Council’s Decree on the Priestly Ministry and Life, we ourselves reiterated the Church’s doctrine on the *Real Presence* of Christ in the Eucharist, stating that “it is presence in the fullest sense: because it is a substantial presence by which the whole and complete Christ, God and man, is present” (PAULI PP. VI *Mysterium Fidei*, 39). We went on to state that the Catholic Church “has at all times given to this great Sacrament the worship which is known as *latría* and which may be given to God alone” (*Ibid.* 55). And we are convinced today that an ever greater emphasis on this teaching will be a source of strength to all the pilgrim people of God. For this reason we encourage you and all your priests to preach frequently this rich doctrine of Christ’s presence: the Eucharist, in the Mass and outside of the Mass, contains the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ and is therefore deserving of the worship that is given to the living God, and to him alone.

Another clear enunciation of the importance of the Eucharist is contained in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, in which participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice is called “the source and summit of the whole Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium*, 11). The Eucharistic Sacrifice is itself the apex of the Church’s liturgy, the entirety of which is the festive expression of salvation, and has as its primary role the glory of the Lord (Cfr. PAULI PP. VI *Allocutio habita ad Helvetiae sacros Praesules, occasione visitationis «Ad limina» coram admissos: AAS 70 (1978) 104*). In the words of the Council: “the Sacred Liturgy is above all the worship of the divine majesty” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 33). What a great service to the people of God: week after week, year after year to make them ever more conscious of the fact that they can draw unlimited strength from the Eucharist to collaborate actively in the mission of the Church. It is the summit of their Christian lives, not in the sense that their other activities are not important, but in the sense that, for their full effectiveness, these activities must be united with Christ’s salvific action and be associated with his redemptive Sacrifice.

The Vatican Council assures us that the Eucharist is likewise “the source and summit of all evangelization” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5). The very identity of the Church, in her evangelizing mission, is effected by the Eucharist, which becomes the goal of all our activities. All the pastoral endeavors of our ministry are incomplete until the people that we are called to serve are led to full and active participation in the Eucharist. Every initiative we undertake in the name of God and as ministers of the Gospel must find fulfillment in the Eucharist.

A year ago, at the canonization of John Neumann, we cited the importance that the Eucharist held for him as a Bishop of the Catholic Church, precisely in the context of evangelization. And the example we gave was the importance he attributed to the Forty Hours’ Devotion. Venerable Brothers, we do not hesitate today to propose to you and all your faithful the great practice of Eucharistic adoration. At the same time we ask you and your priests to do all in your power so that the reverence due to the Eucharist will be understood by all the faithful, that Eucharistic celebrations everywhere will be characterized by dignity, and that all God’s children will approach their Father through Jesus Christ, in a spirit of profound filial reverence. In this regard, we recall the words we spoke last year to a group of Bishops on their *ad limina* visit: “The Catholic liturgy must remain theocentric” (AAS 69 (1977) 474).

As we thank God for giving the people of his Church a greater awareness of their liturgical role, we believe that it is good to repeat—in order to help you to formulate the directive you give in your Dioceses—what we mentioned in our Bicentennial Letter to the American Bishops: “We are pleased to recall that the Holy See has authorized, under certain circumstances, the distribution of Holy Communion by extraordinary ministers duly deputed to this high task. But we wish to emphasize that this ministry remains an extraordinary ministry to be exercised in accordance with the precise norms of the Holy See. By its nature therefore the role of the extraordinary minister is different from those other roles of Eucharistic participation that are the ordinary expression of lay participation ” (AAS 68 (1976) 410). To give the Eucharist to God’s people remains in general therefore an honored pastoral function. Extraordinary ministers are envisioned by the Instruction “*Immensae Caritatis*” where there is a genuine lack of ministers, and under these conditions fulfill a providential role.

The Vatican Council assures us, moreover, that the Eucharist is the root and center of the Church’s unity (Cfr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 6). No Christian community can be built up without the Eucharist. In the Eucharist the faithful must experience their oneness as God’s people united in Christ: in his truth and in his love. This matter has been treated in the pastoral message “*To Teach as Jesus Did*”, wherein the American Bishops emphasized that a spirit of fellowship “is fostered especially by the Eucharist, which is at once sign of community and cause of its growth” (*To Teach as Jesus Did*, 24).

From this viewpoint it is then easy to see how the Eucharist is for the whole Church a bond of charity and a source of social love. The tradition of the Church speaks to us in every era of this

marvelous truth. In our Encyclical “Mysterium Fidei”, we stated that Eucharistic worship leads to that social love “by which we place the common good before the good of the individual; we make the interests of the community, of the parish, of the entire Church our own; and extend our charity to the whole world because we know that everywhere there are members of Christ” (PAULI PP. VI *Mysterium Fidei* 69).

Dear Brothers in Christ, with the full conviction of our being we believe that these truths will guide you and sustain you in your apostolic ministry, in the joyful hope of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Eucharist is our source of hope because it is our pledge of life. Jesus himself has said: “I am the bread of life... If anyone eats this bread he shall live forever” (*Io.* 6, 48. 51). Amidst all the problems of the modern world let us remain constant in this hope. Our optimism is based, not on an unrealistic denial of the immense and manifest difficulties and opposition that beset the Kingdom of God, but in a realization that, in the Eucharist, the Paschal Mystery of the Lord Jesus is forever operative, and victorious over sin and death.

We thank you, Venerable Brethren, for your generous commitment to the Gospel, and for all your labors on its behalf; and we ask you to go forward in the power of Christ, the Supreme Shepherd of the Church. We exhort you to be strong in proclaiming the mystery of life in Christ, and in leading your people to the source of this life, the Eucharist. We pray that you, in turn, will encourage the faithful in their Eucharistic vocation. We ask especially that all our sons in the priesthood be sustained and supported in their inestimable role of building up God’s people through the Eucharist.

In all sectors of the Church we pray that there will be a new era of Eucharistic piety, generating confidence and fraternal love, and producing justice and holiness of life.

With these sentiments, Brothers, we invoke upon all of you the wisdom and fortitude of Peter and Paul and the other Apostles; and we commend your ministry to the Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and patroness of your beloved country. In the name of Jesus we bless you all, and through you we send our Apostolic Blessing to “those who love us in the faith. Grace be with you all!” (*Tit.* 3, 15-16).