



The Holy See

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

Friday, 4 May 1979

*Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,
with deep fraternal love I welcome you today.*

AS MEMBERS and observers of the Antilles Episcopal Conference you have assembled at the tomb of the Apostle Peter – and together with his successor – in order to celebrate your unity in Christ and in the Church.

Since you come from a Conference that serves so many different nations and peoples of the Caribbean and the mainland, I believe you are in a position to reflect with special interest on the great theme of Church unity. I also believe that the emphasis of the Second Vatican Council on the mystery of the Church as "a sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of unity of the whole human race"^[1] has a particularly deep meaning for all of you. And because reflection on this theme is both a cause of immense joy and of pastoral strength, I present it to you this morning, asking the Holy Spirit, by whose power the Church is unified in her ecclesial communion and her ministry ^[2]to bestow on us the grace for which Christ prayed: that we may be *consummati in unum*^[3].

Communion and ministry are indeed two great aspects of the Church's unity, of which we are the servants and guardians. To see the Church as a communion is to gain insight into the heart of her mystery, and into the identity of our ministry as Bishops, who are called to proclaim that "our fellowship is with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ"^[4].

The communion that we promote and foster is a communion of faith in God. We believe in the Father, who out of his infinite love reveals himself, and who through the power of the Holy Spirit

gives us salvation in his Incarnate Word. We believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, who by his death gathers together in the unity of his Church the scattered children of God[5].

For us Bishops this communion of faith is the basis of our apostolic task of building up the Church by proclaiming the Gospel, each of us finding solidarity with Saint Paul as he says: "For this Gospel I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher... "[6]. Our communion of faith also sheds light on the unity of our ministry, in which, with the universal Church we announce the unchanging message of salvation in Christ. Our communion of faith imposes on us the great responsibility, in which we are sustained by God's power, of giving to our people the fullness of Christian doctrine. In his last talk on the very day he died, my predecessor John Paul I spoke of this from the standpoint of the People of God, saying: "Among the rights of the faithful, one of the greatest is the right to receive God's word in all its entirety and purity, with all its exigencies and power"[7].

The unity of the Church is likewise manifested in our communion of love, a love that is greater than our own powers and that is infused into us at Baptism, a love whereby we love God with all our heart and soul and mind, and our neighbour as ourself[8].

Saint Augustine presents us with a great insight of truth when he says: "Loving God comes first as a commandment, but loving our neighbour comes first as an activity" (*Dei dilectio prior est ordine praecipendi, proximi autem dilectio prior est ordine faciendi*)[9]. On the basis of this understanding, our ministry takes on new vigour as we reach out to all people to bring them Christ's love, to put into practice his commandment of love. In the communion of love we find the sustaining force for serving humanity. From the Gospel message we learn to honour man and promote the inescapable exigencies of human dignity, and to help humanity pursue the task of building the civilization of love.

In the expression of the Second Vatican Council, the great unity willed by Christ for his Church is modelled on and finds its source in the unity of the Blessed Trinity and subsists in the Catholic Church[10]. And yet we know that the task of promoting the restoration of unity among all Christians is far from complete. It is a task that we have received from the Lord. Fidelity to Jesus Christ requires that we should pursue with vigour the cause of Christian unity. In our own day the Holy Spirit has powerfully communicated to the world the urgency of this matter: *ut omnes unum sint*[11]. This goal of the Ecumenical Council is clear, and as Pope, I have stated that "since the moment of my election I have formally committed myself to promote the carrying out of its norms and guidelines, seeing this as one of my first duties"[12].

At the same time we must be willing to commit ourselves to making the effort and to adopting the means which lead to Christian unity. The Council makes detailed suggestions. Of particular importance is the question of examining our own fidelity of Christ: we are constantly called to conversion or change of heart. It is useful today to repeat the Council's emphasis that "this change

of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayers for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and can rightly be called 'spiritual ecumenism' "[13].

It is inevitable, and indeed salutary, that as Christians strive towards the restoration of unity they should feel the pain of existing divisions. As I pointed out in the above-mentioned talk: "A sickness is not healed by giving painkillers but by attacking its causes". We must continue to work humbly and resolutely to remove the real divisions, to restore that full unity in faith which is the condition for sharing in the Eucharist.

Of great importance is the fact that "in every Eucharistic celebration it is the whole faith of the Church that comes into play; it is ecclesial communion in all its dimensions that is manifested and realized"[14]. Sharing in the Eucharist therefore presupposes unity in faith. Intercommunion between divided Christians is not the answer to Christ's appeal for perfect unity.

God has set an hour for the realization of his salvific design for Christian unity. As we yearn for this hour, in common prayer and dialogue, and endeavour to offer an ever more purified heart to the Lord, we must also wait for the Lord's action. It must be said and said again that the restoration of Christian unity is above all a gift of God's love. Meanwhile, on the basis of our common Baptism and the patrimony of faith that we already share, we must intensify our common witness to the gospel and our common service to humanity.

In this context I would repeat the words I spoke during my [recent visit to Nassau](#): "With deep respect and fraternal love I wish also to greet all the other Christians of the Bahamas" – and today I add: of all the Antilles – "all who confess with us that 'Jesus Christ is the Son of God'[15]. Be assured of our desire to collaborate loyally and perseveringly, in order to attain by God's grace the unity willed by Christ the Lord".

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, this mystery of unity in Christ and his Church must be lived to the full by the People of God; and the basis and centre of every Christian community is the celebration of the Eucharist[16]. I ask you to remind your faithful of the real privilege that is theirs to assemble for Sunday Mass, to be united with Christ in his worship of the Father. Sunday Mass is indeed of primary value in the life of the faithful, not in the sense that their other activities lack importance and meaning in Christian living, but rather in the sense that Sunday Mass sustains, ennobles and sanctifies all that they do throughout the week.

When you return to the field of your pastoral labours, I ask you to assure all the priests once more of my love, and to make every effort to give, together with them, the unity of ecclesial communion and ministry in all its intensity. The missionaries, still necessary in your lands, have a special place in my heart and in the heart of Christ the Saviour.

I also commend the seminarians to your pastoral care, so that they may learn by experience how intensely personal is the love that they will be called to manifest in the name of Christ the Good Shepherd, who knows his sheep by name. And to those who collaborate with you for the cause of the Gospel, in particular the catechists, I send the expression of my gratitude. My special support goes to the Christian families striving to exemplify the covenant of God's love and the unity of Christ's Church.

Before concluding, I make an appeal for the young people of your local Churches. Within the communion of the Church they constitute a sign of the youth and dynamism of the Church herself; they are the hope of her future. Let us do everything in our power so that the young people will be trained in justice and truth and nourished by God's word, so that rejecting all deceptive ideologies they may live in real freedom as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

To all united with you in the communion of the Church I send my Apostolic Blessing, invoking the intercession of Mary the Queen of heaven and Mother of the Risen Christ.

Je n'oublie point que, parmi vous, plusieurs Evêques sont de langue française et même de départements français d'outre-mer, mais le voisinage, la similitude des problèmes pastoraux, vous amènent à vivre en solidarité avec les autres Evêques de la région des Antilles. Transmettez à vos prêtres, à vos religieux et religieuses, aux laïcs chrétiens de vos diocèses, la pensée affectueuse du Pape, avec son exhortation à former des communautés bien unies, qui sachent approfondir et exprimer leur foi, et se soucient de vivre l'Évangile au cœur de leur vie.

A vous-mêmes, chers Frères, mes vœux chaleureux pour votre ministère et ma Bénédiction Apostolique!

[1] *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

[2] Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 4.

[3] *Io.* 17, 23.

[4] *1 Io.* 1, 3.

[5] Cfr. *Io.* 11, 52.

[6] *1 Tim.* 1, 11.

[7] Ioannis Pauli I *Allocutio ad Episcopos Insularum Philippinarum habita, die 28 septembris 1978.*

[8] Cfr. *Matth.* 22, 37-39.

[9] S. Augustini *In Io. tract.*, 17.

[10] Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 8; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 2. 3.

[11] *Io.* 17, 21.

[12] Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Allocutio ad Secretariatum pro Christianorum Unitate Fovenda*, die 18 nov. 1978.

[13] *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 8.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] 1 *Io.* 4, 15.

[16] Cfr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 6.

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