



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO A GROUP OF BISHOPS FROM THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ON THEIR «AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM» VISIT**

Monday, 19 September 1983

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1. I have recently spoken to other groups of American Bishops about two important aspects of the great mystery of the Church: the Episcopate and the Priesthood. I would now like to reflect with you on yet another special gift of God to his Church, and this gift is *the religious life*.

So much is religious life a part of the Church, so intimately does it touch her constitution and her holiness, that it must form an integral part of the pastoral solicitude of the Pope and the Bishops, who have a unique responsibility for the entire life of the Church and are meant to be signs of her holiness. In speaking about religious life we are speaking about an ecclesial reality which concerns the Bishops *by reason of their very office*.

2. At every moment, but especially during the Holy Year of the Redemption, the Church offers *the call to conversion* to all her members, particularly to religious. This call to conversion goes out to religious so that they may acquire the full benefits of the Redemption and be ever more faithful witnesses of that Redemption; so that they may be ever more authentic channels of the Redemption for the People of God through their own spiritual vitality which, in the Communion of Saints, is a supernaturally effective contact with the Redemption; and so that through conversion they may live more faithfully the unity of the Church, which is itself the effect of the Redemption and a participation in it.

For this reason I wrote to all the Bishops asking for their *special pastoral service to the religious of the United States in the context of the Holy Year of the Redemption*. In my Letter I stated: "It is my earnest hope that the Holy Year of the Redemption will truly be for religious life a year of fruitful

renewal in Christ's love. If all the faithful have a right - as they do - to the treasures of grace that a call to renewal in love offers, then the religious have a special title to that right".

The whole thrust of my initiative was formulated as an invitation, a call to be extended to the religious, to open wide the doors of their hearts to the Redeemer. In this regard I wrote: "*I ask you to invite all the religious* throughout your land, in my name, and in your own name as Bishops, in the name of the Church and in the name of Jesus, to seize this opportunity of the Holy Year to walk in newness of life, in solidarity with all the pastors and faithful, along the path necessary for us all - the way of penance and conversion".

3. This pastoral endeavour is of such importance that it could be fulfilled only by *a full collegial commitment* on the part of all the Bishops of the United States. At that time I promised you my fraternal and prayerful support. I also named a Commission headed by Archbishop John Quinn whose task it would be to assist you in the exercise of collegiality and to facilitate your pastoral work of "helping the religious of your country whose Institutes are engaged in apostolic works to live their ecclesial vocation to the full". I am deeply grateful to the Commission for the generosity and zeal with which they are striving to formulate a suitable program that will effectively assist the body of Bishops who have the main responsibility in this matter. As guidelines for both the Commission and yourselves in this important work, I approved a summary of the salient points of the Church's teaching on religious life prepared by the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes.

Since then I have also had the opportunity, as I had hoped, to speak personally with so many Bishops about religious life, hearing their viewpoints and learning about their own devoted pastoral service to religious. I am deeply grateful to our Lord Jesus Christ that this initiative has been so zealously undertaken by the Commission and by individual Bishops, and that it is seen for what it is, *an application* - an extremely important application - *of the principle of collegiality*, a principle so forcefully enunciated by the Second Vatican Council. In proposing this initiative to your pastoral zeal, my first intention has been to affirm collegial responsibility for the state of religious life, which is intimately linked to the mystery of the Church and to the mystery of the Episcopate. Religious need the support and assistance of the Bishops in their lives of consecrated witness to the holiness of Christ and to the primacy of God. Your collegial collaboration is not only a means of giving *general support* to religious and to assisting them in solving *particular problems* that inevitably touch their lives; it also signifies an *authentic functioning of collegiality*, an authentic and vital relationship between the Episcopate and the religious.

4. The collegial service that you, as Bishops, are asked to render to religious in the precise area of episcopal competence is, above all, to proclaim a call to holiness, a call to renewal and a call to penance and conversion. In other words, *in the name of the Redeemer to extend the call of the Holy Year*, asking for the greatest possible response of love. In my Letter to you I mentioned that "this call is linked in a particular way with the life and mission of religious.

it affects them in a special way; it makes special demands on their love reminding them how much they are loved by Christ and his Church”.

This initiative of pastoral care for religious is one aspect of *the great dialogue of salvation*, which begins with an awareness of God’s love, made visible in the Incarnation, and leads to the fullness of salvation effected by this love. The whole dialogue of salvation is directed to *the full acceptance, through metanoia, of the person of Jesus Christ*. In the case of the religious, as in the case of the faithful, the process is the same: in the very moment in which we Bishops recognize our own need for conversion, the Lord asks us to go out to others - humble and repentant, yet courageous and without fear - to communicate with our brothers and sisters. Christ wants to appeal through us, to invite and call his people, especially his religious, to conversion. *The aim of all dialogue is conversion of heart*.

5. It is not my intention on this occasion to speak about all the essential elements of the Church’s teaching on religious life, as de-scribed in my Letter and in the document of the Sacred Congregation. I am convinced that you will continue to reflect on all of these points, which are taken from authentic sources, so as to be able to explain and promote them all. At this time I would like *to emphasize only a few points* intimately linked to the theme of conversion and holiness of life in the context of religious life and of the pastoral responsibility of the Bishops, who are “entrusted with the duty of caring for religious charisms, all the more so because the very indivisibility of their pastoral ministry makes them responsible for perfecting the entire flock” (*Mutuae Relationes*, 9 c.). Bishops must proclaim the nature of religious life as teachers of the faith and representatives of the Church that guarantees the charism of religious. This proclamation is both an instruction for the People of God and an encouragement for the religious.

In selecting certain aspects of religious life for special reflection, the notion of *prayer* stands out immediately. The new Code of Canon Law states that *the first and principal duty of all religious* is the contemplation of things divine and constant union with God in prayer (Cfr. *Codex Iuris Canonici*, [can. 663, § 1](#)). The question of religious being united with God in prayer precedes the question of what activity they will perform. The idea of prayer is again underlined as it touches the apostolate. The Code insists that the apostolate of all religious *consists primarily in the witness of their consecrated life*, which they are bound to foster *through prayer and penance* (Cfr. *Codex Iuris Canonici*, [can. 673](#)).

6. All of this tells us something very profound about religious life. It speaks to us about the value of living for God alone, of witnessing to his Kingdom, and of being consecrated to Jesus Christ. Through the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, religious consecrate themselves to God, personally ratifying and confirming all the commitments of their Baptism. But even more important is the divine action, the fact that *God consecrates them* to the glory of his Son; and he does this *through the mediation of his Church*, acting in the power of his Spirit.

All of this emphasizes the esteem that we Bishops must have for the religious and for the immense contribution that they have made to the Church in the United States. And yet this contribution is more a contribution of *what they are* than of what they have done and are doing. In speaking of religious, we must say that their greatest dignity consists in this: that they are persons individually called by God and consecrated by God through the mediation of his Church. The value of their activity is great, but the value of their *being* religious is greater still.

Hence one of the Bishop's contributions is *to remind the religious of their dignity and to proclaim their identity before the People of God*. This enables the laity to understand more clearly the mystery of the Church, to which the religious offer so much.

7. *The ecclesial dimension* is absolutely essential for a proper understanding of religious life. The religious are who they are because the Church mediates their consecration and guarantees their charism to be religious. Although their primary apostolate is to witness, their other apostolates involve a multiplicity of works and activities performed for the Church and coordinated by the Bishops (Cfr. *ibid.*, [can. 680](#)).

Since *the value of the consecration of religious and the super natural efficacy of their apostolates depend on their being in union with the Church* - the entirety of which has been entrusted to the Bishops' pastoral care for governing (Cfr. *Act. 20, 28*) - it follows that Bishops perform a great service to the religious by helping them to maintain and deepen their union with the Church, and by assisting them to harmonize all their activities with the life of the Church. The fruitful living of the religious charism presupposes the faithful acceptance of the Church's Magisterium, which in fact is an acceptance of the very reality and identity of the Episcopal College united with the Pope. The College of Bishops, as the successor of the Apostolic College, continues to enjoy the guidance of the Holy Spirit; the words of Jesus apply still today: "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (*Luc. 10, 16*).

8. Venerable and dear Brothers, in the dialogue of salvation I would ask you to speak to the religious about their *ecclesial identity* and to explain to the whole People of God how the religious are who they are only because the Church is what she is in her sacramental reality. And I would ask you to emphasize the special feminine role of women religious: in the Church and personifying the Church as the Spouse of Christ, they are called to live for Christ, faithfully, exclusively and permanently, in the consciousness of being able to make visible the spousal aspect of the Church's love for Christ.

And may everyone realize that *the greatest misunderstanding* of the charism of religious, indeed the greatest offense to their dignity and their persons, would come from those who might try *to situate their life or mission outside its ecclesial context*. Religious are betrayed by anyone who would attempt to have them embrace teaching against the Magisterium of the Church, who conceived them by her love and gave them birth in her liberating truth. The acceptance of the

reality of the Church by religious and their vital union - through her and in her - with Christ is *an essential condition for the vitality of their prayer*, the effectiveness of their service to the poor the validity of their social witness, the well-being of their community relationships, the measure of the success of their renewal and the guarantee of the authenticity of their poverty and simplicity of life. And only in total union with the Church does their chastity become the full and acceptable gift which will satisfy the craving of their hearts to give themselves to Christ and to receive from him, and to be fruitful in his love.

9. Dear Brothers, through our collegial action, especially in the Holy Year of the Redemption, *let us manifest our pastoral love* in a special way to the religious of the United States. And *let us lead the way in the sacrifice and love demanded by conversion*. As Bishops we must help ensure for this generation and for those to come that the magnificent contribution made by the religious of the United States to the mission of the Church will continue.

But, above all, what is at stake in the collegial service of our pastoral love is to confirm the religious of America in their charism *to be religious*, and *to be ever more the expression of Christ's holiness* in the mystery of the Church. May they live for Christ, as Mary lived for Christ, in renunciation, sacrifice and co-redemptive love, filling up "what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for his body, the Church" (Col. 1, 24). The first and principal duty that springs from their being religious will always be "the contemplation of things divine and constant union with Christ in prayer" (*Codex Iuris Canonici*, [can. 633, § 1](#)).

Finally, for the benefit of all, let us recall those memorable words of Paul VI that apply to every age of the Church's life: "Do not forget, moreover, the witness of history: faithfulness to prayer or its abandonment is the test of the vitality or decadence of the re-ligious life" (PAULI VI *Evangelica Testificatio*, 42).

All of this is part of the ministry whereby we, as Bishops, live the mystery of the Church, encouraging the religious, whom we love and for whom we live and are willing to die, to strive to become ever more "the very holiness of God" (2 Cor. 5, 21).