



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA  
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT**

*Friday, 29 May 1992*

*Dear Brother Bishops,*

1. In these days of joyful expectation before the Solemnity of Pentecost, I have the happiness of welcoming you, the *Bishops of Southern Africa*, on the occasion of your *ad Limina* visit. In my heart I embrace all the priests, Religious and lay faithful of the Dioceses and Apostolic Vicariates of *Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland*. I thank Bishop Napier for his kind words of greeting. With Saint Paul, "I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus... who will sustain you to the end" (1 Cor. 1:4, 8).

In the realm of faith, your pilgrimage to this Holy See is an encounter with the very origins of the Church: *the mission of the Apostles and their confession of Jesus as the Son of God and Saviour of the world*. According to the Father's plan, it was in Rome that Peter and Paul sealed their preaching with that most eloquent testimony, the imitation of Christ's free self-giving: Peter here at the foot of the Vatican Hill and Paul outside the city walls along the Ostian Way. We who are successors of the Apostles hear Christ address to us the same command as he gave to them: "Go... make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). It is my prayer that your *ad Limina* visit will encourage you in your own confession of the Lord and in your commitment to his service.

2. In the five years since your last *ad Limina* visit, *in Southern Africa there has been a significant shift in the course of political events*. After much travail, Namibia has achieved its independence and taken its place among the free nations of the world. The Republic of South Africa has taken new steps along the path of its transformation into a nation without apartheid. Hope for a peaceful transition to a more just and democratic society has been strengthened since the agreement, in December 1991, in favour of the *Convention for a Democratic South Africa* and since the

referendum a few weeks ago. I pray that God will guide the leaders of all your countries in establishing a secure foundation for a society in which the dignity and rights of every individual are assured. Above all, my heart and voice are united with yours in asking that the peoples of your region be spared any further violence.

3. The decision to turn away from unjust political structures, welcome as it is, does not mean that the bitter fruits of past policy will simply disappear from your midst. Herein lies an extraordinarily urgent task for Christians, a task in which ecumenical cooperation can be an essential element of effective progress. I am referring to an observation made in many of your quinquennial reports: namely, that one of the great challenges now facing the Church in Southern Africa is to assist *in healing the wounds caused by racial segregation and discrimination*, to serve as God's instrument for reconciling those parts of society which have, through years of contention, become confirmed in their mistrust of one another. It is for the Church to point out that the root of enmity is sin—a decision to act contrary to God's commandment of love. Humbly, yet with supreme confidence in the Lord who has taught her how to love, the Church in Southern Africa must invite *all to a change of heart*, must teach the ways of repentance and forgiveness, so that the concrete steps to be taken for the transformation of society will effectively bring people together in mutual acceptance and solidarity.

In this regard I would call your attention to the 1983 Assembly of the Synod, of Bishops devoted to "Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church". There the People of God heard again a powerful summons to be the sign of reconciliation for the whole human family. In the subsequent Apostolic Exhortation, "[Reconciliatio et Paenitentia](#)", it was my wish "to pass on the elements from the doctrinal and pastoral treasure of the Synod which seem to me providential for people's lives at this magnificent yet difficult moment in history" (John Paul II, [Reconciliatio et Paenitentia](#), 4). To you, the Fathers and Shepherds of the flock of Christ in Southern Africa, I entrust this document anew. *The Gospel of reconciliation*—given to the Church, preached by the Apostles and their successors, and lived by Christ's disciples in every age—is the greatest assistance the Church can offer to Southern Africa in this decisive hour. I am confident that the Lord who died "to gather into one the children of God... scattered abroad" (Jn. 12:52) will strengthen you and all the faithful for this task.

4. Social changes in Southern Africa greatly alter the context in which the members of Christ's Body live the life of grace and strive to be a leaven in society. Action on many fronts is needed so as to achieve a civic order worthy of the human person and in harmony with the natural moral law established by the Creator. The *truth about human dignity* which makes all racial discrimination and injustice so abhorrent is *the reason why the Church must defend the sanctity of life* from the moment of conception, oppose abortion and euthanasia, promote sound family life with permanent and monogamous marriage as its basis, and emphasize the equal yet complementary status of men and women in society. The Church likewise champions the truth about man when she calls for authentic human development. An essential goal of such development is an economic order in

which all men and women have the opportunity to use their gifts and talents in *work which contributes to the common good and from which they obtain a just recompense* in order to support themselves and their families.

The Church remains committed to using all her spiritual authority to inform and confirm individual consciences and the moral conscience of each nation in Southern Africa concerning the implications of justice and freedom. As you so clearly emphasize in your Pastoral Letter, "A Call to Build a New South Africa", because the Catholic Church transcends every political, economic or social system (Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 42), *her pastors will continue to raise an impartial voice* on ethical or moral issues of public debate and on trends in the nation's life. In many ways, both for society and the Church, the process of building a better future will be even more demanding than the struggles of the past. It will require fresh resources of intelligence, wisdom and moral rectitude.

5. By responding to her Lord with ever greater fidelity, the Church becomes that effective sign and sacrament of unity for which she was established (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1). It is just such fidelity that you seek to foster through the pastoral plans which you have developed or are developing for your particular Churches.

I note with special interest your decision to make *the encouragement of small Christian communities a central element* of this endeavour. Such a focus, if properly understood, can lead the faithful to a more intense experience of the Church as a *communion, a living unity wherein the members share the gifts of grace and make visibly present the one divine life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit* (Cf. *ibid.* 4). You have wisely seen that the renewal of preaching, catechesis and the liturgy called for by the Second Vatican Council reaches fulfilment in strengthening ecclesial communion. To deepen the sharing of the family of believers in the life of the Trinity strengthens the Church's prophetic witness and her call for justice.

A more intense experience of true Christian fellowship has in many parts of the Church proved to be an effective means for giving *pastoral care to young people*. For them, awareness of the support of the ecclesial family is especially necessary as they move into their adult roles in the Church and society and face the challenges which accompany their development.

6. In trying to nurture small Christian communities a Bishop's special concern is to see *that in every part of the flock there is present the integral life and faith of the whole Catholic Church* united around the successor of Peter. This of course demands a great deal of your attention as pastors. A particular instance of this pastoral responsibility is your overseeing of the *teaching of theology in seminaries, colleges and universities and the religious instruction given in schools and parishes*. In this you discharge the duty God has laid upon you of ensuring that his people receive the saving truth which is their right as baptized members of the Church. When the Christian community is fully alive in Christ's Spirit, it is filled with zeal for sharing the love of God with others and more readily appears as the efficacious instrument of the salvation for which all human hearts

are made.

7. Strengthening the life of small Christian communities in your particular Churches likewise produces a favourable environment from which God will bring forth priests and Religious to serve his People and to carry the light of the Gospel to those who have not yet heard of his love. I understand your anxiety to provide labourers for the vineyard; it is the echo in your hearts of the Good Shepherd's own concern for those whom he treasures more than his own life (Cf. Jn. 10:11). You can be confident that from Christian communities renewed in grace more young people will be called and that they will be sustained by their brothers and sisters in answering the Lord's invitation.

In the work of guarding and guiding Christ's flock, the Bishop's *chief co-workers* are the *members of his presbyterate*. I am aware of the remarkable generosity of your priests, and I am confident that you will continue to support them by your fatherly and fraternal care. In the circumstances of the present day, a form of assistance and support which priests especially need is the affirmation of the indispensable worth of their ministry for the eternal salvation of those entrusted to their care. Theirs is the work of Christ. In explaining the vocation, mission and consecration of priests, the Apostolic Exhortation "Pastores Dabo Vobis" affirms that "the priest's fundamental relationship is to Jesus Christ, Head and Shepherd. Indeed, the priest participates in a specific and authoritative way in the 'consecration/anointing' and in the 'mission' of Christ.... In this way priests, like the Apostles, act as ambassadors of Christ" (John Paul II, Pastores Dabo Vobis, 16). *This truth about the ministerial priesthood is the heart of every priest's self-understanding, no matter what the particular context is in which the Lord sends him to serve. Only by building on this foundation will the formation of future priests and the permanent formation of those who are already ordained bring forth fruit that will last (Cf. Jn. 15:16). The identity, which all priests – diocesan and Religious – share with the Good Shepherd, is the motive and wellspring for their pastoral charity and their fraternal cooperation in caring for his flock.*

8. Dear Brother Bishops, my remarks to you today cannot hope to respond fully to the diversity and complexity of the circumstances in which you exercise your ministry. What is essential is that we should be united in ensuring that the genuine ecclesiological vision bequeathed to us by the Second Vatican Council is the source of our preaching and pastoral leadership. We know that the Church is much more than an instrument of human progress or social change. She is the field of God (Cf. 1 Cor. 3:9) the Spouse of Christ (Cf. Rev. 21:2), the temple in which the Spirit dwells (Cf. 1 Cor. 3:16). She is "our Mother" (Gal. 4:26) who moulds us into Christ's image until he is fully formed in us (Cf. *ibid.*4, 19). *She is the place of encounter with the living Christ.* As the Council reminded us: "The conditions of this age lend special urgency to the Church's task of bringing all men to full union with Christ" (Lumen Gentium, 1). Not an imaginary Christ who would be no more than the projection of too earthly aspirations, but "Christ crucified... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 23-24). Only in union with the Incarnate Son of the Father will your peoples be truly liberated and truly blessed with life and peace.

In my love and concern for you and your communities, I remember in my prayers all the people of Southern Africa. Commending you and all the faithful of Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland to Mary, Mother of God, I impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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