



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF INDIA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

*Apostolic Palace of Castel Gandolfo
Monday, 28 August 1995*

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. In the love of our Lord Jesus Christ I welcome you – the Pastors of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of *Bhopal, Calcutta, Cuttack–Bhubaneswar, Delhi and Ranchi*. Your visit "*ad Limina Apostolorum*" expresses the profound communion of charity and peace which links the particular Churches in India to this Apostolic See, hallowed by the martyrdom of Sts Peter and Paul. My recent Encyclical Letter "[Ut Unum Sint](#)" describes *the mission of the Successor of Peter within the Episcopal College as that of a "sentinel"* who confirms his brother Bishops so that "the true voice of Christ the Shepherd may be heard in all the particular Churches" (John Paul II, [Ut Unum Sint](#), 94) I therefore thank the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for giving us this occasion to experience our "*partnership in the Gospel*" (Phil. 1:5), in order to draw strength and encouragement from one another according to "the immeasurable riches of his grace" (Eph. 2:7).

2. From her birth in the Upper Room at Pentecost, the Church is the *visible sign and effective instrument of the communion of God with humanity*. As Pastors of God's Church in India *you are called to perpetuate in your local Communities the grace of Pentecost* and to foster from generation to generation the fidelity to the Gospel, the fraternal life and ardent prayer which characterized the Apostolic community (cf. Acts 2:42). After two thousand years, the whole Church is still called to renew herself in the image of the first community of disciples. As I have written in the Apostolic Letter "[Tertio Millennio Adveniente](#)", the best preparation for the new millennium must be a renewed commitment to apply, as faithfully as possible, *the teachings of Vatican II to the life of every individual and of the whole Church* (cf. John Paul II, [Tertio Millennio Adveniente](#), 20) Herein lies the programme of our ministry, individually and as members of the College of

Bishops. The Council contains riches of doctrine and spirituality, and directives for formation, pastoral activity and the practical organization of Church life, which must continue to produce many positive results of evangelization and service.

The years between now and the Great Jubilee should serve to incite all the Church's members, in a special way her ministers, to open their hearts and minds to what the Holy Spirit is doing to lead us "into all the truth" (Jn. 16:13).

3. One of the great achievements of the Second Vatican Council was the strengthening of episcopal collegiality, "that privileged expression of the pastoral service carried out by Bishops in communion with the Successor of Peter" (John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 19). The Church in India is especially graced because in it *the traditions of East and West embrace*, proclaiming before the world "the divinely revealed and undivided heritage of the universal Church" (John Paul II, *Oriente Lumen*, 1). I am convinced that the witness of harmony and communion between the different Rites in India is an important part of the realization of God's mysterious and gracious will to draw ever more people of your great nation to the light of the Gospel. Whatever Rite the Bishop belongs to, he is first and foremost a son of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. For this reason, the *Catholic Bishops' Conference of India*, the principal forum through which your collegiality is exercised, is not weakened but enriched by bringing together the Bishops of the various Rites.

When misunderstandings or difficulties arise, *solutions must be sought according to the mind of Christ*, a mind which St Paul tells us is free from self-interest and pride, ever ready to look first to the welfare of others (cf. Phil. 2:3-5). May the words of the First Letter of Peter echo in the hearts of all those who carry the burden of the episcopal office: "Have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart and a humble mind" (1 Pt. 3:8). I have every confidence that all the Bishops will realize that they are linked one to the other and that each one, in concert with his fellow Bishops, is responsible for the whole Church (cf. *Christus Dominus*, 6).

4. In the beautiful expression of St Ignatius of Antioch, the Bishop is "the living image of God the Father" (St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad. Trall.*, 3.1). You express this *spiritual fatherhood* most intensely by conferring the gift of the Holy Spirit in Ordination, thereby associating priests, both diocesan and religious, with your presbyterate. The Second Vatican Council affirms that "on account of this communion in the same priesthood and ministry, the Bishop should regard priests as his brothers and friends" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 7). In order to deepen the bonds of communion, you must take care to show genuine spiritual leadership, openness, compassion and co-operation with your brother priests, who share the burden of the ministry with you.

A clear sign of your local Churches' vitality is the harvest of priestly and religious vocations which many of you are experiencing. Since this is a great blessing but also a responsibility, I can only encourage you to select with care the candidates whom you promote to the priesthood, to watch

over the doctrinal soundness of the programme of studies, and to ensure the spiritual and pastoral formation of your seminarians. You will also invite Religious Superiors to do the same in relation to the members of their Institutes. While generously assisted by many others, the *Bishop has a personal responsibility for the priestly formation* of candidates from his own Diocese, a responsibility which he cannot neglect.

It is particularly important that future priests understand clearly and realistically the *value of celibate chastity* and its relation to the priestly ministry. In this way they will learn to "appreciate, love and live celibacy according to its true nature and according to its real purpose, that is for evangelical, spiritual and pastoral motives" (John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 50). Where a secularistic and materialistic view of life is advancing, all the Church's ministers are called to be "signs of contradiction", particularly through the practise of the *virtue of penance*; this includes discipline, mortification, self-sacrifice and generosity towards others. Shared simplicity of life brings joy to the presbyterate and, when accompanied by mutual trust, facilitates the willing obedience which every priest owes to his Bishop. The unity of a local Church is strengthened when episcopal authority is exercised as selfless service, and priestly obedience is practised as ready co-operation.

5. The lay faithful too look to their Bishops for real and effective spiritual leadership. In the words of the Council: "In exercising his office of father and pastor, a Bishop should stand in the midst of his people as one who serves. Let him be a good shepherd who knows his sheep and whose sheep know him. Let him be a true father who excels in the spirit of love and solicitude for all" (*Christus Dominus*, 16). Effective pastoral ministry requires a profound appreciation of the fact that the Spirit endows the members of the Church with different charisms "for building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12). *Each has a gift of the Spirit to share*; each has need of the gifts of others (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-31) I invite you and your priests to pray and work closely with the lay faithful so that each one will bring to fruition the good work which God has begun in him (cf. Phil. 1:6).

6. Communion with God and others is intensified in your Churches when the Gospel is proclaimed with fidelity and the Sacraments are celebrated with faith and reverence, according to the liturgical norms in effect. Through these means Christ enables his Church to communicate the power of his Paschal Mystery. *The Eucharist – the Sacrament of unity – is the heart of every parish's life*. This presence of the Lord in the community is "the living source for its upbuilding and the sacramental bond of its being in full communion with the whole Church" (John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 26). No one who "eats this Bread and drinks this Cup" can fail to hear the call to holiness and to the apostolate which lies at the core of the Gospel message.

Furthermore, at the Sacred Banquet the meaning of differences in race, nationality, culture, caste and social status is revealed in its true light. Here the "oneness in Christ Jesus" which characterizes all those who have been baptized (cf. Gal. 3:27-28) is verified and deepened. Thus the Church resolutely holds that discrimination not only undermines the fundamental equality of all

those created in God's image and likeness and redeemed by his Son's Blood, but also compromises the communion of those joined in the Body of Christ. It is necessary for us to *name the evil of discrimination wherever it exists and to see it as a "structure of sin"*. Such "structures" are always "rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove" (John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 36). Only a firm commitment to conversion and prayer for a "new heart" can eradicate the lingering influence of forms of discrimination within the ecclesial body.

7. Nourished by the Eucharist, Indian Catholics are called to bear witness to God's love for all. True solidarity with one's neighbour is rooted in the conviction that Christ has united himself with each and every person by means of his redemptive Incarnation (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22). The Virgin Mary, who was so deeply imbued with the spirit of the Lord's poor (cf. Lk. 1:46-53), guides the Church into a growing awareness that "the truth about God who saves, the truth about God who is the source of every gift, cannot be separated from his love of preference for the poor and humble" (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 37). I encourage your efforts to ensure that the vast network of Catholic educational and health institutions in India do effectively serve the marginalized and the most needy among you.

It is my fervent hope that the Catholics of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of *Bhopal, Calcutta, Cuttack-Bhubaneswar, Delhi and Ranchi* will continue to show that "love of preference for the poor" which is "a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness" (John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 42). When Christians practise the virtue of charity in the specific form of solidarity with the "*least of the brethren*", who bear the indestructible image of Christ (cf. Mt. 25:46), the gratuity of that love calls forth God's abundant blessings upon the local Church.

8. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate: When you return to your Dioceses, I ask you to convey my cordial greetings to all the priests, religious and lay people with whom and for whom you carry out your ministry. All together you are building up the Church of God in India, *preparing for the great springtime of Christianity which lies ahead in the Third Millennium, and which will be an important theme of the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops now being prepared*. I entrust you to Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, and pray that through her maternal intercession the whole Family of God in India will be ready to meet the Lord who is coming. With my Apostolic Blessing.

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