



The Holy See

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

Saturday, 25 February 1995

*Dear Cardinal Shirayanagi,
Dear Brother Bishops,*

1. It is a source of deep satisfaction for me to meet the *Bishops of Japan* on the occasion of your *ad limina* visit, a visit which has the purpose of manifesting and strengthening the bonds of hierarchical communion between the Pastors of the particular Churches and the Successor of Peter in the service of the Gospel, "the source of all life for the Church" (*Lumen Gentium*, 20). Through you, I greet all the Catholic faithful of your country, whom I encourage in the Lord Jesus, "in whom we have boldness and confidence of access through our faith" (Eph. 3:12). In a special way over the last few weeks I have prayed for all those affected by the *earthquake* which devastated the *area of Kobe*. In union with the Church throughout the world, I have commended the victims to God and invoked his comfort and strength upon the survivors, that with the support of the whole nation they may soon overcome the effects of that terrible tragedy.

2. Still fresh in my mind is the memory of *my recent pastoral visit to Asia and the Far East*. In Manila, the World Youth Day clearly showed the extraordinary capacity of young people to take their own important place in the Church's evangelizing mission. Young people are especially sensitive to the idea and reality of God's pilgrim people, which makes its way through human history, meeting the difficulties and challenges of every age and every place, until it reaches the fullness of life in Christ (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 9). At each of the World Youth Days, young people have shown that they are ready to respond to the call of Christ. They are eager to journey together in faith along the path of life, in service to their brothers and sisters. I am confident that young Japanese Catholics too, under your guidance and leadership, will benefit from opportunities to meet one another in order to reflect together on the demands of the Gospel for their lives.

As Pastors you are conscious of the enormous challenge, in a culture such as your own, of inspiring individuals and society as a whole to give attention to the deeper questions about life and its meaning. In particular you are very aware of the difficulty *of passing on the faith to the younger generation*. In your pastoral activity you often meet cases in which the Christian life is a one-generation experience, in the sense that adults who are themselves converts to the faith, and who live that faith with conviction and generosity, nevertheless find it very difficult to pass it on to their children. I encourage you both to revitalize the ordinary, proven channels of catechetical instruction and Christian formation, and to find new and creative ways of involving young people more fully in the life of the ecclesial community.

3. An ever-present priority of your episcopal ministry is *the renewal of the Catholic community in faith and holiness of life*. This renewal is nothing other than a more fervent conversion to Christ, a deeper knowledge and love of his person and message, an ever increasing fidelity of the Church's members to the demands of the Gospel. Beginning with the Bishops and priests, and sustained by the men and women Religious, the Catholic community in Japan is called, together with the whole Church, to prepare for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. This involves a more complete formation in the faith with the help of the "Catechism of the Catholic Church" a revitalized practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, a reemphasizing of the importance of prayer in the Christian life, and a more intense liturgical and devotional life. The whole purpose of celebrating the Jubilee is to "rejoice in salvation" (cf. John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 16). For this reason, it is necessary for Christ's followers to be renewed in mind and heart, that their joy may be deep, sincere and complete. Many practical aspects of this ecclesial renewal have already been identified in the *National Incentive Conference for Evangelization*, first held at Kyoto in 1987 and then at Nagasaki in 1993, at which meeting you paid special attention to the family as the domestic church and the primary missionary unit. I encourage you to continue to call the faithful to a heightened awareness of their personal duty to advance the Church's mission. I would repeat St Paul's exhortation: "Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

4. The Church's evangelizing mission includes many aspects: preevangelization or activities aimed at arousing interest in religious questions and disposing people to hear the Christian message; *proclamation* of salvation in Jesus Christ; *catechesis* which transmits knowledge and instruction in the faith. In all of these activities *the laity have their own specific role and responsibility*, and it is your task and the crown of your ministry to inspire them to live fully Christian lives, so that more by example than by words alone they will bear witness to Christ before their fellow citizens. A re-reading of "Christifideles Laici" will show that the laity have a special task of demonstrating how Christian faith constitutes the only fully valid response to the questions and hopes that life poses to every individual and to society (cf. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 34). "In fact", as I said to the members of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences gathered recently in Manila, "when we try to imagine the future of evangelization on this continent, do we not see it as the *irradiation of a vibrant, living faith* practiced and declared by

individual Christians and Christian communities... which, with few exceptions, form a *pusillus grex* in the midst of numerically superior 'hearers' of the word?" (John Paul II, *Address to the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*, 4 [15 Jan. 1995].

5. The particular Churches over which you preside in love are undergoing a profound transformation, due to *the arrival in your midst of large numbers of immigrant workers, many of whom are Catholics*. The Statement of your Conference's Committee for Social Activities, of November 5, 1992, has highlighted the many human and social problems connected with this phenomenon, as well as the pastoral opportunities which it brings. The presence among you of so many brothers and sisters from other cultural backgrounds should be seen by Japanese Catholics as an opportunity to give fuller expression to the universality and catholicity of the Church. Paradoxically, while these immigrants face great difficulties and are sometimes subjected to unjust treatment, their situation is making many people more aware of the demands of justice and the implications of respect for universal human rights.

6. On a different plane, modern Japan offers many opportunities for a serious and fruitful *interreligious dialogue with the followers of other religions*, especially Shintoism and Buddhism. Catholics must be concerned to promote this dialogue, both because we all have a common origin as God's chosen creatures and a common destiny in his eternal love, and because the Church's mission in the world is one of solicitude for the whole human family, especially in its search for truth, happiness and solidarity with all who suffer or are in want. Of vital importance is *the dialogue of life* between Catholics and the followers of other religious traditions, a dialogue which springs naturally from the presence of the Church's members in the social sphere, primarily in education, social works and communications. The laity in particular should be conscious of the importance of their witness and example in fostering understanding and cooperation among all people of good will. On your part, as Pastors, there is need for further reflection on the difficult but vital questions raised by the inculturation of the faith. It is a question of continuing along the lines of what you have already taught in the booklet entitled *Guidelines for Catholics with Regard to Ancestors and the Dead*.

Perhaps interreligious dialogue is the proper context in which the Church in Japan can give attention to the widespread "crisis of civilization" which, as I wrote in the Apostolic Letter "Tertio Millennio Adveniente", is becoming more and more apparent in societies which are highly developed technologically but which are interiorly impoverished by the tendency to forget God or to keep him at a distance (John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 52). Many people are beginning to reconsider their single-minded devotion to economic success at all costs, realizing its price in human and spiritual terms. In your quinquennial reports you have referred to the spiritual emptiness which prompts people to seek new religious experiences, sometimes in groups which do not have a solid basis in Christianity. Herein lies a twofold challenge for the Catholic community: to be easily accessible and available to those who show a sincere interest in the Church's message, and to co-operate with other believers in building *the civilization of love*,

founded on the universal values of peace, solidarity, justice and liberty, which find their full realization in Christ.

7. *Fifty years have passed since Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed* by the most lethal weapons ever used. Even today the scars of those terrible moments are still perceptible in the lives of many Japanese. I am sure that the Church in Japan will help to keep alive among your fellow-citizens, as they remember those sad events, the need to continue to work for a world committed to peace, and therefore to justice and solidarity in relations between peoples and nations. As I said when I visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial in 1981, "to remember the past is to commit oneself to the future... (in the) conviction that man who wages war can also make peace" (John Paul II, *Address at the Peace Memorial of Hiroshima*, 1-2, [25 Feb. 1981]). With the persistence of tensions and conflicts in various parts of the world, the international community must never forget what happened at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as a warning and an incentive to develop truly effective and peaceful means of settling tensions and disputes. Fifty years after the Second World War, the leaders of nations cannot become complacent but rather should renew their commitment to disarmament and to the banishment of all nuclear weapons. It is more than ever urgently necessary for the international community to devise *a workable system of negotiation, even of arbitration*, on the basis of a universal respect for human life and for the dignity and rights of every human being.

8. Dear Brother Bishops, these are some of the thoughts which your visit suggests. I cordially urge you to go on serving the Church with zeal and dedication. I ask you to take my warmest greetings to your priests, your closest co-operators in the pastoral ministry. I express my prayerful support of the men and women Religious who, through their witness and their various apostolates, play such an important part in the life of your particular Churches. I pray that the whole Japanese Catholic community will become more conscious of the need *to pray for and to foster vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life*. In all things "be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love" (1 Cor. 16:13-14). With my Apostolic Blessing.

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