



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF ENGLAND AND WALES
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

23 September 1997

*Your Eminence,
Dear Brother Bishops,*

1. In the love of the Lord Jesus I welcome you - the Bishops of England and Wales - on the occasion of your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*, and I extend cordial greetings to the priests, deacons, religious, and lay faithful of the particular Churches over which you preside in love. This year marks the 1400th Anniversary of the arrival in Britain of Saint Augustine, the Apostle of the English, whose work among the Anglo-Saxons laid the foundation for the later growth of Christianity in your land. In a very real way our present meeting is linked to those events of fourteen centuries ago. The bonds of ecclesial communion which were then set in place between the Apostolic See and that part of the universal Church in your care have survived the vicissitudes of history and are vividly expressed and renewed through your visit, which has one of its main moments in your profession of faith at the tombs of the Princes of the Apostles, Peter and Paul. You have come "to see Peter" (cf. Gal 1:18) in the person of his Successor in the See of Rome, this "greatest and most ancient Church" (Saint Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, III.3.2). Thus your visit bears witness to the unique ministry of unity which the Bishop of Rome discharges for the benefit of the whole of Christ's flock (cf. Jn 21:15-17), just as it speaks of the shared responsibility we have as Bishops "for all the Churches" (2 Cor 11:28).

The image of the first Christian community as described in the Acts of the Apostles - "devoted to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42) - is a reminder that the Church is a loving communion of believers gathered around the Apostles and their Successors and constantly being formed into a unity of faith, discipline and life in the power

of the Holy Spirit. In a particular way the Lord has entrusted to the College of Bishops the task of building up the *koinonia*, and therefore we must never cease to encourage God's People to be "of one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32). It is important that in the eyes of the Church and of the world we, the Shepherds, be seen to be "united by the bonds of unity, charity and peace" (*Lumen Gentium*, 22) in leading the faithful to an ever deeper union with the Triune God (cf. 1 Jn 1:3) and communion with one another in the Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 10:16). In a spirit of evangelical trust we must endeavour to make our communion ever more profound and cordial.

2. The approaching Great Jubilee constitutes a pressing invitation to the Church's Pastors to guide the communities entrusted to them on a spiritual pilgrimage to the very heart of the Gospel. Our journey to the Year 2000 should take the form of a genuine pursuit of conversion and reconciliation by purifying ourselves of past errors and instances of infidelity, inconsistency, and slowness to act (cf. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 33). Certainly, it is not enough to make public statements of sorrow for past wrongs. We must remind ourselves and the faithful of the radically personal nature of the repentance and conversion required. The joy of the Jubilee is "above all a joy based upon the forgiveness of sins, the joy of conversion" (*ibid.*, 32). In this sense, it is an occasion to help the faithful recover the true "sense of sin" (cf. 1 Jn 1:8), leading to a renewed appreciation of the beauty and joy of the Sacrament of Penance (cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 48). There will be a renewal of sacramental practice if there is a determined emphasis on the Sacrament of Reconciliation in preaching, catechesis, diocesan pastoral programmes and planning. The best catechist of Reconciliation is the priest who himself regularly has recourse to this sacrament. Priests who are dedicated to the ministry of reconciliation know that it is a demanding and often exhausting task, yet "one of the most beautiful and consoling" of the priest's life (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 29). On the other hand, the faithful in a sense have a right to have scheduled times for Penance at their parish and to find their priests always ready to receive the person who comes looking for Confession.

3. The parish remains the place where the faithful normally gather as one family to hear the saving word of God, to celebrate the sacraments with dignity and reverence, and to be inspired and strengthened in their mission to consecrate the world in holiness, justice and peace. The parish makes present the mystery of the Church as an organic community, in which "the pastor - who represents the diocesan Bishop - is the hierarchical bond with the entire particular Church" (*Christifideles Laici*, 26). Other institutions, organizations and associations are signs of vitality, instruments of evangelization and a leaven of Christian life as long as they contribute to building up the local community in the unity of faith and ecclesial life. Every community in which the faithful gather for spiritual nourishment and works of ecclesial service must be fully open to "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3) - a unity which entails an organic connection with the particular Church in which that community's ecclesial character is guaranteed and its charisms activated.

Pastors have a duty to foster the "charisms, ministries, and different forms of participation by the

People of God, without adopting notions borrowed from democracy and sociology which do not reflect the Catholic vision of the Church and the authentic spirit of Vatican II " (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 36). In the document *The Sign We Give* approved by your Conference in 1995, you recognized the need to strengthen "collaborative ministry" among Bishops, priests, religious and lay people, so that an authentic communion in mission would be ever more evident in diocesan and parochial life. Working together in a genuine "partnership in the Gospel" (Phil 1:5) involves much more than a distribution of tasks driven by practical necessity. It has its foundation in the Sacraments of Christian Initiation (cf. *Christifideles Laici*, 23) and requires an awareness of the diverse gifts which the Spirit entrusts to the whole Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12:4-13). Precisely for this reason it also calls for theological and practical clarity regarding what is specific to the ministerial priesthood. Is it not true that the more the laity's own sense of vocation is deepened, the more they recognize the priest's sacramental consecration and his specific role in promoting "the baptismal priesthood of the entire People of God, leading it to its full ecclesial realization" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 17)?

4. Your priests are the great work of your episcopal ministry. In every aspect and phase of their priestly lives, they must be the subject of your prayer and the object of your affectionate care. Since your last *ad Limina* visit the Apostolic Visitation of the seminaries of England and Wales has been completed and has confirmed that today, more perhaps than in the past, candidates need guidance in the area of their human development and formation, especially with regard to interpersonal relations in general, to chastity and celibacy, and to the whole range of attitudes and qualities that will lead them to become mature and well-balanced human beings, gifted in their dealings with others and psychologically equipped for the demands of their priestly life and work. They need a deeply assimilated human, spiritual, academic and pastoral training if they are to prepare for the priesthood according to the mind of Christ and his Church. It is significant that your Conference is revising the *Charter for Priestly Formation*, a revision which will take into account the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and the relevant documents of the Holy See in its desire to present the Church's understanding of the sacred ministry as a sacramental configuration to Jesus Christ, enabling the priest to act *in persona Christi Capitis* and in the name of the Church.

The Visitation also took note of the specific cooperation of members of the laity, both men and women, in the training of priests. This cooperation will bear the hoped for results, "provided it is suitably coordinated and integrated" with the work of those primarily responsible for the formation of seminarians (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 66). It is always necessary to distinguish between the specific training of seminarians preparing for Holy Orders, and the courses offered to those who will exercise other ministries in the Church. Priestly training is not only or primarily a matter of developing pastoral skills but of forming the attitudes - the very heart and mind - of Christ Jesus (cf. Phil 2:5) in those who will represent the Eternal High Priest.

And how can we fail to mention the importance of fervent and continuing prayer, especially in

families and parishes, for an increase of vocations to the priesthood and religious life? The apostolate of vocations depends greatly on the apostolate of prayer. Like the disciple Andrew who brought his brother Simon to Jesus (cf. Jn 1:40-42), the Bishop has a personal responsibility for promoting new vocations to the Lord's service. While he should encourage priests and religious to do all they can in this field, he should also support specific programmes aimed at bringing young people into contact with the seminary and with the different forms of the consecrated life. In this it is essential to have the cooperation of priests and consecrated persons who effectively project a positive image of their calling.

5. The faithful look to you, as individual Bishops and as a Conference, to provide the spiritual and moral leadership which will help them to respond to the complex questions facing them and their families in today's society. They expect their spiritual guides to be able to share with them "reasons for hope" (cf. 1 Pet 3:14): the hope which derives from the truth about man as God's beloved creature, redeemed by the blood of Christ and destined for eternal communion with him in heaven; the truth about man's dignity and therefore about his responsibility for life and for the world in which he lives.

Today, human life itself tends to be considered in terms of a "consumer mentality". Life is valued only if it appears to be useful in some way, or can bring satisfaction and pleasure. Suffering is rejected as a meaningless evil to be avoided at all costs. Influential elites seek to move public opinion to endorse abortion and euthanasia as morally acceptable solutions to life's problems. To those now seeking legal backing for the so-called "right to die with dignity" the Church cannot but reply that Christians have a clear obligation to oppose legislation which jeopardizes human life or repudiates its dignity (cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 72). As Bishops, we must teach that responsible stewardship over life demands that everyone respect the medical, moral and ethical difference between healing - using all the ordinary means available to care for life from natural conception until its natural end - and killing. In the face of recent developments in biotechnology, with extremely delicate moral implications, the whole Church, guided by the College of Bishops in union with the Pope, must firmly and clearly proclaim that scientific research remains true to itself as a human activity only if it respects the ethical order inscribed by the Creator on man's heart (cf. Rom 2:15).

6. Likewise, when you speak out against injustice and encourage the lay faithful to be the "salt of the earth" (cf. Mt 5:13), you are saying that the authentic renewal of social and political life is based on the moral order revealed in creation (cf. Rom 2:15) and illuminated by the mystery of Christ, in whom "all things hold together" (Col 1:17). The diffusion of the Church's social doctrine is indeed "part of the Church's evangelizing mission" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 41). The Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 brings with it the challenge "to raise our voices on behalf of the poor of the world" (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 51), and offers the Church in England and Wales the occasion to make a new covenant with the poor - with those who are needy, suffering, abandoned, and especially with those whose lives are threatened in their mother's womb or who are neglected and

made to feel burdensome in their declining years. I urge you to insist with the faithful and with society as a whole on the duty to see in each and every person "a manifestation of God in the world, a sign of his presence, a trace of his glory" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 34).

7. Your service of ecclesial communion necessarily leads you to a loyal and respectful dialogue with those who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church. You have welcomed the urgent appeal of the Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*, in which I said that the re-establishment of the full visible unity of all Christians, is "an organic part of [the Church's] life and work, and consequently must pervade all that she is and does" (No. 20). The ecumenical journey is not without difficulties and apparent setbacks, among which must be included the decision by the Church of England to admit women to the ordained ministry. While continuing to seek with the members of other Christian bodies a deeper understanding of the nature of ministry and of the Church's teaching authority, you are called on to explain the reasons why the Catholic Church holds that she has no authority to change something so fundamental in the whole of Christian tradition (cf. *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, 4). The faithful should be helped to see that this teaching does not discriminate against women, since the priesthood is not a "right" or a "privilege", but a vocation which one does not take upon oneself but to which one is "called by God, just as Aaron was" (Heb 5:4). On the other hand, it is incumbent on the ecclesial community to foster greater appreciation of women's specific gifts and to enable them to be more actively involved in roles of responsibility in the Church (cf. *Letter to Women*, 11-12). We must all make efforts in this regard, confident that the Church in the Third Millennium will bring forth new ways in which "the genius of women" will build up the Body of Christ.

8. Dear Brothers in the Episcopacy, it is my fervent prayer that your visit to the tombs of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul will encourage you to persevere in the work of Christ, the Eternal Priest, the Shepherd and guardian of our souls (cf. 1 Pet 2:25). "I hold you in my heart, you who are all partners with me in grace ... and in the defence and confirmation of the Gospel" (Phil 1:5, 7). As Bishops, in obedience to the truth which alone will make us free (Jn 8:32), we are often called upon to repeat the "hard sayings" (Jn 6:60) and indicate the "narrow gate and the hard way that leads to life" (cf. Mt 7:14). We try to do so with compassion and with respect for every person. We must walk with our brothers and sisters, encompassing with love all those who are afflicted with human weakness and recognizing in the poor and the suffering the likeness of our poor and suffering Lord and Master (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 8). Always, our hope and confidence are founded on the power of the Risen Lord. Invoking upon you and upon those entrusted to your pastoral care an abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit, I commend you to the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church, and I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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