



The Holy See

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

Friday, 31 October 1997

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. It is a great joy for me to welcome to this house you who are the Pastors of Christ's Church in the North African region. You come on pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles to renew your hope and apostolic zeal, in order to carry out with ever greater intensity your episcopal ministry among the peoples of your region. I thank Archbishop Teissier of Algiers, President of your Episcopal Conference, for his forceful words expressing the sorrows and tragedies of your people, but also the joys and lights that manifest God's action there. In receiving you, I would first like to recall the memory of Cardinal Duval, who for many years was President of your Conference and whose episcopal ministry so marked the Church's life in North Africa. As the Successor of Peter, today I would like to encourage you in your pastoral service. Convey my affectionate greeting also to the faithful of each of your Dioceses and, through them, to all who live in the countries of the Maghreb.

2. Your presence in Rome gives me the opportunity to turn my eye to each of your communities. In recent months *the Church in Libya* has had the joy of welcoming a new Pastor in the Vicariate Apostolic of Benghazi. I am pleased to receive him and to wish him a fruitful episcopal ministry. I also hope that there will soon be an end to the hardships of the Libyan people resulting from the air embargo imposed on their country several years ago.

I take pleasure in recalling the visit I made last year to *Tunis* and the warm welcome I received from the Catholic faithful and the Tunisian people. On that memorable day in the footsteps of the holy men and women who marked out the history of the country, I was able to meet you, the Bishops of the Maghreb, for the first time together on the soil of your region.

The Catholic community of *Morocco* remains in my memory since the happy day of my meeting with them and Moroccan young people in Casablanca, which gave new growth to relations and dialogue between Christians and Muslims. I hope they fervently continue their witness of Gospel brotherhood among the residents of that country.

With special affection I would like to greet and encourage the Catholics of *Algeria*. I am aware of their sufferings and those of all the Algerian people. I am grateful to them for courageously sharing, in Christ's name, in the trials of that nation so tragically affected in body and soul. Nineteen religious have shed their blood in recent years, willingly offering the supreme gift of themselves for their brothers and sisters. Among them I would particularly like to mention Bishop Pierre Claverie of Oran and the seven Trappist monks of Notre-Dame de l'Atlas. As violence unacceptable to every human conscience continues to rage, I pray God to give peace at last to the land of Algeria and to lead everyone on the paths of respect for all human life towards a true reconciliation and healing of the numerous wounds inflicted on the hearts of so many people. For my part, I often appealed to all men of goodwill to work together for the restoration of peace in Algeria. I know what a painful cross that land is enduring and I am close to all who mourn the loss of their loved ones. Once again, I would like to give my assurance that the Holy See will make every effort to help restore peace to Algeria.

3. The Church in your region gives particular expression to the mystery of *God's Incarnation among men*, especially the mystery of Nazareth. In fact, she manifests the discreet yet living presence of Christ, while respecting individuals as well as different human and religious communities, in order to communicate to all the fullness of the heavenly Father's love. The vocation of your communities is also a *vocation to hope* based on Christ. A little flock, which possesses no power or pretension in society save that of love, you are led to put all your trust in God, confident that it is he who is guiding you as you reach out to your brothers and sisters. St Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, the centenary of whose "entry into life" we are celebrating this year and whom I proclaimed a doctor of the universal Church several days ago, wrote: "From the moment I understood that it was impossible for me to do anything by myself, ... I felt that the only thing necessary was to unite myself more and more to Jesus and that all things would be given to me besides. In fact, never was my hope mistaken" (*Manuscript C, 22v^o*). May the Lord help you to persevere in faith and love, even when the results of your work are a long time in coming!

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, you have the weighty task of supporting the people entrusted to you on their journey to the kingdom and in their witness among their fellow men. Being of one heart within your Episcopal Conference, continually strengthen the unity of your communities, while recognizing legitimate differences! Be attentive leaders who know how to listen and encourage each individual in his Christian life so that he can grow in faith and charity.

4. In the Church's mission *priests* have a special role. Men of communion in the Christian

community, they serve the life and growth of God's People by proclaiming to them the Word of Life and providing them with the Church's sacraments. I invite them to make the Eucharist the centre of their lives and the heart of their ministry, discovering there in ever greater depth the event in which Christ, having reached out to humanity, offers his entire self for the world's salvation.

The priest is also "called to witness in all his relationships to fraternity, service and a common quest for the truth, as well as a concern for the promotion of peace and justice" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 18). In your region, with great generosity and courage, through a concerned presence for everyone, your priests witness to the universality and graciousness of God's love in the midst of their brothers and sisters, often among those who are most poor. I encourage them to strengthen their witness by confidently advancing on the way of holiness. May they be certain that the authenticity of the life that comes from God is expressed above all by the quality of their spiritual being, based on their docility to the Holy Spirit's work within them.

5. I would like especially to greet *the men and women religious* of the Maghreb, who bring the wealth of their charisms to the Church's life. The Church is grateful to them for their Gospel witness among their brothers and sisters.

In your particular situation, where members of the institutes of consecrated life often form an important nucleus of pastoral workers in your communities, a *trustful dialogue* between the Bishops and those responsible for these institutes must allow for a joint examination of the demands of pastoral life associated with the presence of their members. I deeply hope that the Superiors of these congregations will generously show their solidarity with your particular Churches, especially by fostering vocations to the Church's witness in your region.

Changing human situations require of consecrated persons a great spirit of faith to adapt themselves to the new circumstances and different needs that arise. I encourage them to remain *faithful to their charism*, while having the *boldness of creativity*. It is authentic witnesses to God's love that the world needs most of all. Once again I strongly urge all consecrated persons: "Live to the full your dedication to God, so that this world may never be without the ray of divine beauty to lighten the path of human existence" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 109).

6. The role of the *lay faithful*, some of whom are closely linked with the destiny of your countries' people, has great significance for expressing the profound reality of the Church. In fact, "simply in being Christians, even before actually doing the works of a Christian, all are branches of the one fruitful vine which is Christ. All are living members of the one Body of the Lord built up through the power of the Spirit" (*Christifideles laici*, n. 55). With the priests and religious, in communion with their Bishops, the laity form the *Church as Family* which the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops wished to promote. I invite them to participate more and more actively in the life and witness of their communities, in order to be a radiant local Church, welcoming to all.

During the World Youth Day in Paris, I appreciated the *presence of young people* from your region, particularly the students. They have an important place in your communities and give an excellent witness of Gospel living among their brothers and sisters in the universities and schools, often under difficult conditions. Through you I say again to them: "Continue to contemplate God's glory and God's love, and you will receive the enlightenment needed to build the civilization of love, to help our brothers and sisters to see the world transfigured by God's eternal wisdom and love" (*Homily at Longchamp*, n. 6; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 27 August 1997, p.2).

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, allow me ask you to convey the Pope's affectionate greeting to the disciples of the Gospel who are in *very difficult situations or great hardship*. I know their courage and their devotion to Christ and his Church. May they put all their trust in the Lord, who will never abandon them!

7. At the Synods held in many of your Dioceses, the faithful have often expressed the desire for a solid *spiritual and doctrinal formation*. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* now represents a common reference text which it will be good to make known. It is desirable that this deepening of the faith should contribute to the unity of each person's life, in order "to grow continually in intimate union with Jesus Christ, in conformity to the Father's will, in devotion to others in charity and justice" (*Christifideles laici*, n. 60). A special place should also be given to knowing the culture of the people among whom Christians are called to live so that, with an attitude of listening and dialogue, they will be better able to give a Gospel witness in view of the new questions and problems that man and society are raising today.

8. *Service to the very poor* is a prophetic sign that Christians are committed to following Christ. I know and appreciate what has been done in your Dioceses to show the graciousness of God's love to all people. As I had occasion to stress at the *beatification of Frédéric Ozanam*: "The neighbour is every human being without exception. It is not necessary to ask his nationality, or to which social or religious group he belongs. If he is in need, he must be helped. This is what is required by the first and greatest divine law, the law of love of God and neighbour" (*Paris*, 22 August 1997, n. 1; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 27 August 1997, p. 3). Through various diocesan aid organizations, such as Caritas, often in cooperation with other associations and also by personal sharing, not only do you assist in providing the destitute with the means of existence, but above all you help them to recognize their dignity as men and women created in God's image. Your activities in the service of health care, education and human development, which must often be adapted to new needs, remain the primary way to manifest the charity of Christ and are places for meeting and sharing, where hearts can open themselves to mutual trust.

9. Among *the believers of Islam* your communities are a sign of the Catholic Church's esteem for them and her desire to continue searching with them for a dialogue in truth and mutual respect. In an era too often troubled by feelings of distrust or even animosity, your communities give a selfless witness of friendship and harmony which sometimes proves heroic in the tragic situations

some of them experience. It is satisfying to note that sharing in the same hardships fosters a new attitude of mutual trust and understanding. Despite the difficulties, remain firm in the conviction that dialogue is "a path toward the kingdom and will certainly bear fruit, even if the times and seasons are known only to the Father" (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 57).

10. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, we are preparing for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000; the coming year will be dedicated to the Holy Spirit and to the rediscovery of his presence and activity in the Church and the world. It will be an opportunity for Catholics to *renew their hope*, that basic virtue which "encourages the Christian not to lose sight of the final goal which gives meaning and value to life, and on the other, offers solid and profound reasons for a daily commitment to transform reality in order to make it correspond to God's plan" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 46). In your particular and sometimes dramatic conditions, I invite you then to seek out and highlight *the signs of hope* that reveal to us the Holy Spirit's work in human hearts. I pray to the Mother of Christ, the Blessed Virgin whose whole life was guided by the Spirit, to be your protectress and to lead you on the paths of trust and peace to the meeting with her divine Son. From my heart I grant my Apostolic Blessing to each of you, to your priests, deacons and religious, and to all the lay faithful of your Dioceses.

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