



The Holy See

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

Friday, 16 January 1998

Dear Brothers in the Episcopal Ministry,

1. I cordially welcome you to the Pope's house, where Bishops are more family members than guests. I extend my greeting to Cardinal Henryk Gulbinowicz, Metropolitan Archbishop of Wrocław, to the Metropolitan Archbishops of Gdańsk, Gniezno, Poznań and Szczecin-Kamień, to the residential Bishops of the Dioceses of Kalisz, Koszalin-Kołobrzeg, Legnica, Pelplin, Toruń, Włocławek and Zielona Góra- Gorzów. I also greet the Auxiliary Bishops of the above-mentioned Archdioceses and Dioceses. I am pleased to have this meeting and those that will take place over the next few weeks with the successive groups of Polish Bishops coming to the Eternal City *ad limina Apostolorum*. They bear witness to their deep bond of faith and love with the Successor of St Peter. The mutual bond that is shown during this visit is the visible sign of their unity and the expression of their obedience to the one Master and Lord, Jesus Christ, who has called us and made us servants of the truth revealed to his people.

Five years have passed since the last *ad limina* visit of the Polish Episcopate. They have been years of intense exchanges, during which I experienced your generous cooperation and could share the anxieties and joys of your local Churches. Also present among you are Bishops called to the pastoral service in recent years. I extend a particularly cordial welcome to them. May this first visit to the tombs of the Apostles intensify their desire to imitate even more closely the Good Shepherd who "lays down his life for his sheep" (cf. *Jn* 10:15) and strengthens them in their witness to the People of God entrusted to their pastoral care. I also take this opportunity to remember our Brothers in the Episcopate who during the last five years have passed into eternity. In our prayers we commend them to the divine mercy.

2. The Polish Bishops' visit today to the Bishop of Rome in a certain sense reciprocates my own,

because it comes a few months after my pilgrimage to my beloved homeland which took place between May and June last year, when I was able to serve the Church in Poland and all my compatriots. Our meeting renews its living echo and represents a special complement to that Pastoral Visit. As a result of the inscrutable designs of divine Providence, today not only can the Bishop of Rome receive the Bishops of the whole world in his home, but he himself can visit their Churches. He meets the faithful and shares their joys and concerns. This is a new, modern expression of communion and collegial responsibility for the Church *cum Petro et sub Petro*. Once again, in your presence, I want to thank God for the wonderful exchange of gifts that took place during those days, which were memorable for me. During the various stages of the pilgrimage, we together experienced the presence of Christ, rediscovering the place he occupies in the life of every person, as in the life of the Church and of the nation. Once again we realized that Christ is our only way to "the Father's house" (cf. *Jn 14:6*). We understood that on this journey the Church has a special role - that of serving man, every man, so that he may find himself fully in Christ - in his mystery of the Incarnation and of the Redemption. Only "Christ, who died and was raised for the sake of all, can show man the way and strengthen him through the Spirit in order to be worthy of his destiny: nor is there any other name under heaven given among men by which they can be saved" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 10).

3. A few weeks after my departure, the population of the western regions and cities of Poland that I visited during my last pilgrimage was subjected to the great trial of flooding. Everyone was deeply shocked by the unprecedented force of this powerful element, which engulfed many people, threatened the basic essentials of a great number of families and communities, destroyed or damaged many homes, workplaces, hospitals, schools, artistic monuments and roads. At the same time however, the long days of flooding revealed an extensive level of goodness, authentic solidarity, generosity and the capacity for organizing mutual aid. Moreover, the local media, especially the radio stations, played a special role in bringing everyone to join forces in the territories stricken by the disastrous flood, in inspiring sensitivity to the fate of the injured and in coordinating aid. We give thanks to God and men for all the good done during those July days, which were both memorable and sorrowful. At the same time, as Pastors of the Church, you should continue, as far as your strength and possibilities allow, to ensure that over time the inhabitants of the areas affected by the flood are not forgotten. Divine Providence never ceases to give men of goodwill opportunities for an active love which specifically prepares their hearts to receive the Gospel.

4. My pilgrimage to the homeland was part of the whole universal Church's preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. The Church in Poland and especially the Archdiocese of Wrocław rendered a service to the universal Church on the eve of the millennium of its foundation, by organizing the 46th International Eucharistic Congress. Here the entire Catholic Church, in the presence of our brothers and sisters from the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities joined by the grace of holy Baptism, bowing in adoration to the mystery of the Lord's Body and Blood, lived and proclaimed the great truth that "Jesus Christ is the one Saviour of the world, yesterday,

today and for ever" (cf. *Heb 13:8*). She experienced it as a strong unifying force for all Christ's disciples; tolerance and mutual acceptance are no longer sufficient and therefore they desire a common witness to unity. For the human family this can and must become the sign that reconciliation is possible. The modern world is experiencing the consequences of deep divisions, the legacy of the great tragedies of the millennium that is now ending; it needs and expects this testimony from Christ's disciples.

The Church's mission is to proclaim salvation in Christ to all people. To fulfil this mission she has no need of any privileges: all she needs is the freedom to proclaim the Gospel truth. She is sustained first of all by the grace of the everliving Christ, which bears fruit in the living witness of the faithful often offered heroically. An extremely important dimension of this witness is unity and the constant pursuit of it. The unity of the Church is based on the Truth, and on love of God and man to which she bears witness. The truth that unites the Church and frees man to hope in eternal life is the living Christ, sent by the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that the world might believe that God is love. Love - the basis of the Church's unity - is the love of Christ poured into our hearts, which unites the scattered children of God. The community of truth and love rooted in Christ "offers all people the blessed hope of God's kingdom" (cf. *Preface of Eucharistic Prayer V*; Polish Missal). This unity, of which the Pope and Bishops are servants, is the ardently longed for goal of everyone who believes in Christ. Furthermore, it is the will and gift of Christ himself!

Here I would like to stress the Church in Poland's active commitment in the area of ecumenism. I am grateful for her concrete and magnanimous contribution to the development of the ecumenical movement. I mentioned some of the initiatives during the address I gave during the memorable meeting in Wrocław. Ecumenical activity cannot be limited to prayer for Christian unity in the month of January, but requires a constant effort, dictated by goodwill and the readiness to give a joint Christian witness in today's pluralistic world. We must pray together, speak to one another and create a sincere atmosphere of human understanding, at both the individual and the institutional levels. We must undertake concrete initiatives so that the ecumenical spirit expressed on various occasions may increasingly permeate the Church's life. In this way, what we can and must do together to show our unity in Christ will become more visible. Christians - in Poland too - must enter the third millennium together, if not completely united, at least more open to each other, more sensitive and more determined on their way to reconciliation.

5. Christ's ministry of reconciliation does not only refer to ecumenical activity, but also includes the Church and the entire nation. The Church has an irreplaceable role at this particular historical moment when many peoples and nations, including our own, thank God for the extraordinary gift of freedom, but nevertheless painfully suffer from the deep wounds left in human souls by the oldest and most recent experiences of hostility and past humiliations. The Church, firmly believing in divine mercy experienced daily, lovingly treats the wounds of sins and teaches how to build unity on the foundations of forgiveness and reconciliation. In Polish society too, the fall of the communist system based on class struggle revealed divisive barriers, until now almost invisible,

and the ancient mistrusts and fears which lurk in human hearts. It also laid bare the wounds in consciences, sometimes subjected to heavy pressure, which did not withstand the trial to which they were exposed. These wounds can only be healed by divine and human love, whose sign is Christ's Heart, pierced on the Cross.

The Polish Episcopate must continue courageously to guide Christ's ministry of reconciliation. This will be an irreplaceable contribution to building a moral order - based on God and his commandments - as their regained freedom requires. The way to the renewal of society passes through the renewal of the human heart. In this process the witness of an inner transformation of the Church's children cannot be lacking. Christ himself left us the best means for achieving it: the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. In the sacrament of Penance Christ reconciles us sinners with the merciful Father who is in heaven and with our brothers and sisters, with whom we live here on earth. In the Eucharist he sanctifies us by his power and gathers us into the one family of those invited to take part in the heavenly banquet in the Father's house. The gift of freedom and the effort to establish a moral order connected with it are a pressing invitation to reconciliation and forgiveness. However, their source is in the goodness of Christ's Heart and in the generosity of the human heart, ready to offer the gift of self after the example of our Redeemer who died for all men, even for those who had crucified him. Poland needs people formed in the school of the love of Christ, "gentle and lowly in heart" (cf. *Mt* 11:29). Only self-sacrificing people strengthened by the Holy Spirit are prepared to make a disinterested gift of themselves and can build the Gospel order of freedom. The sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist endow them with the strength to fight sin and every evil in their personal and social lives, so as not to give in to discouragement and resignation and not to succumb to indifference and pessimism. For the Church, the service of reconciliation in truth and love is not a task limited to a single occasion, but an integral part of her Gospel mission in the service of all men and of the whole nation. The Church in Poland must do all she can to ensure that this work bears abundant fruit in the heart of every individual and in every area of life in our society.

6. In the context of what has already been said, the Church's place and role in the political life of society is quite clear. Here I would like to recall once again the ever timely teaching of the Second Vatican Council, which in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* very explicitly states: "The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified with any political community nor bound by ties to any political system. She praises and esteems those who devote themselves to the public good for the service of men and take upon themselves the burden of public office. She respects and encourages the political freedom and responsibility of the citizen" (cf. *nn.* 75, 76). We should always remember that the external aspect of the life of earthly society, the structure of the State or political power, are among the transient things of this world which can always be improved. The structures that societies give themselves never possess a supreme value; nor can they alone guarantee all the goods man desires. Further, they cannot replace the voice of his conscience nor satisfy his thirst for truth and the absolute. The Church is well aware that acceptance of the Gospel of salvation also brings beneficial effects to the public dimension of the

life of societies and individuals, and can profoundly change the face of this earth, making it more human. Indeed, the Christian's vocation is the public profession of his faith and his active presence in all the areas of civil life. Thus the Church, freely formed by those who believe in Christ, requires of earthly legislation the guarantee "to all citizens equally [of] the right to live in accordance with their consciences and not to contradict the norms of the natural moral order which are recognized by reason" (*Address to the European Parliament*, 11 October 1988, n. 8; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 21 November 1988, p. 12).

In this area, the Bishops of the Church have the most important and delicate role of forming an upright conscience, obedient to the dictates of the Gospel and the Church's teaching; a conscience capable of wise and responsible action in the service of society, so that political activity does not divide but is conducted in truth, justice, love and respect for human dignity, aiming at one end alone: the promotion of the common good. In this area the laity have a special role to carry out, in accordance with the charisms and gifts given them by the Holy Spirit for the fulfilment of their mission. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* I wrote: "In order to achieve their task directed to the Christian animation of the temporal order, in the sense of serving persons and society, the lay faithful are never to relinquish their participation in 'public life', that is, in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good.... As a pressing responsibility, the lay faithful must bear witness to those human and Gospel values" (cf. n. 42).

7. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, The tasks that I have mentioned are not new. Nonetheless they are essential if, in our nation's current historical situation, the Gospel is to have an effective influence on the overall life of society and make its necessary contribution to the reconstruction of an integral and global vision of man and of the world that is opposed to the culture of death, discouragement and the secularization of life. We all want the Gospel to exercise a saving and very profound influence on the moral models and organization of Polish society, in conformity with its millennial Christian tradition. We should thus do all we can to see that the Gospel truth finds its way into consciences in conformity with its unparalleled importance for contemporary man.

I rejoice with you that the Church in Poland is increasingly aware of her mission and role in the new situation. I am conscious of the great pastoral efforts made by the Bishops, priests, consecrated persons and by all the lay faithful who work ceaselessly to ensure that nothing is lost of the great Christian heritage, which is a fruit of the sacrifices and renunciations of many generations. It is important to continue the great evangelizing task of the whole Church, the work of formation organized and carried out consistently in all areas of the pastoral ministry, so that our brothers and sisters may fulfil their vocation in the Church and society. We must help lay people so that in a spirit of unity and through honest and generous service in collaboration with all, they can preserve and develop Christian tradition and culture at the sociopolitical level. The social doctrine of the Church, with its heritage, its essential content and its consequences, should be the subject of profound reflection, study and teaching. Your duty is to enkindle faith in the presence of

the Saviour, who is the source of hope and courage for every individual and for entire nations, and constantly to watch over and inspire the renewal of thoughts and hearts. In this Gospel task put great trust in the work of the Holy Spirit, "who builds the kingdom of God within the course of history and prepares its full manifestation in Jesus Christ, stirring people's hearts and quickening in our world the seeds of the full salvation which will come at the end of time" (*Tertio millennio adveniente* n. 45).

These are only a few of the problems that I wished to present to you, dear Brothers who have come *ad limina Apostolorum*. May they be the object of your common pastoral concern and of your fervent prayer at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul. I commend the Dioceses entrusted to your care and your work of evangelization to the intercession and protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of the patron saints of our country. Accept my Apostolic Blessing with which I embrace all the faithful of your local Churches.

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