



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE CHURCH
IN THE ECCLESIASTICAL REGION OF ST. LOUIS,
OMAHA, DUBUQUE AND KANSAS CITY (U.S.A.)
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

13 June 1998

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. On the occasion of your *ad Limina* visit, I warmly welcome you, the Pastors of the Church in the ecclesiastical region of St. Louis, Omaha, Dubuque and Kansas City. Through you I greet the priests, religious and lay faithful of your Dioceses: "Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord" (1Tim 1:2). Continuing the theme of these *ad Limina* talks, today it is my intention to devote my remarks to the reality of the consecrated life in the Churches over which you and your Brother Bishops preside in charity and pastoral service. These brief reflections aim neither to be a full presentation of the consecrated life nor to address all the practical questions which come up in your relations with religious. Rather, I wish to support you in your ministry as Successors of the Apostles, a ministry which extends also to the consecrated persons living and working in your Dioceses.

In particular, I wish to express a special word of appreciation, gratitude and encouragement to the women and men who, through the observance of the evangelical counsels, make visible in the Church the *form* that the Incarnate Son of God took upon himself during his earthly life (cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 14). By their consecration and fraternal life, they bear witness to the new creation inaugurated by Christ and made possible in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. By their prayer and sacrifice, they sustain the Church's fidelity to her saving mission. By their solidarity with the poor, they imitate the compassion of Jesus himself and his love of justice. By their intellectual apostolates, they serve the proclamation of the Gospel in the heart of the world's cultures. By giving their lives to the hardest tasks, countless consecrated women and men in the United States, and all over the world, testify to the supremacy of God and the ultimate significance of Jesus

Christ for human life. Many of them are involved in missionary work, especially in Latin America, Africa and Asia, and in recent times some of them have borne the ultimate witness by shedding their blood for the Gospel's sake. The witness of consecrated persons makes tangible in the midst of God's People the spirit of the Beatitudes, the value of the great commandment of love of God and love of neighbor. In a word, consecrated persons are at the very heart of the mystery of the Church, the Bride who responds to Christ's infinite love with her whole being. How could we Bishops fail to praise God unceasingly and be filled with gratitude for such a gift to his Church!

2. The gift of consecrated life forms an integral part of the pastoral solicitude of the Successor of Peter and of the Bishops. The indivisibility of the Bishops' pastoral ministry means that they have a specific responsibility for overseeing all charisms and callings, and this translates into specific duties regarding the consecrated life as it exists in each particular Church (cf. *Mutuae Relationes*, 9). Religious Institutes for their part ought to be eager to establish a cordial and effective cooperation with the Bishops (cf. *ibid.*, 13), who by divine institution have succeeded the Apostles as shepherds of the Church, so that whoever hears them hears Christ (cf. *Lk* 10:16; *Lumen Gentium*, 20). The new springtime which the Church confidently awaits must also be a time of renewal and even re-birth of the consecrated life! The seeds of renewal are already showing many promising results, and the new Institutes of consecrated life now taking their place alongside the older ones bear witness to the abiding relevance and appeal of the total gift of self to the Lord according to the charisms of the Founders and Foundresses.

3. Over a considerable period religious life in the United States has been characterized by change and adaptation, as called for by the Second Vatican Council and codified in Canon Law and other magisterial documents. This has not been an easy time, since a renewal of such complexity and far-reaching consequences, involving so many people, could not take place without much effort and strain. It has not always been easy to strike a proper balance between necessary change and fidelity to the spiritual and canonical experience which had become a stable and fruitful part of the Church's living tradition. All of this has sometimes resulted in suffering for individual religious and for whole communities, a suffering which in some cases has brought new insights and a new commitment but which in other cases has resulted in disenchantment and discouragement. Ever since the beginning of my Pontificate I have tried to encourage the Bishops to engage religious communities in a dialogue of faith and fidelity, with the aim of helping religious to live their ecclesial vocation to the full. Down the years I have many times discussed the state of religious life in your country with religious themselves, as well as with the Bishops and others concerned. In all the initiatives undertaken in this regard, it has been my intention on the one hand to affirm the personal and collegial responsibility for religious life which belongs to the Bishops as the ones primarily responsible for the Church's holiness, doctrine and mission, and on the other to affirm the importance and value of the consecrated life, and the extraordinary merits of so many consecrated women and men in every kind of service, at the side of suffering humanity.

Today I wish to invite the United States Bishops to continue to foster personal contacts with the

religious actually living and working in the individual Dioceses in order to encourage and challenge them. Generally speaking your relations with religious are truly friendly and cooperative, and in many cases they play an important part in your pastoral plans and projects. It is a matter of confirming that relationship in its natural setting, the context of dynamic communion with the local Church. The mission of religious places them in a definite particular Church: their vocation to serve the universal Church, then, is exercised within the structures of the particular Church (cf. *Address to Superiors General*, November 24, 1978). This is an important point, for many errors of judgement can result when a sound ecclesiology gives way to a concept of the Church too marked by civil and political terms, or so “spiritualized” that the individual’s subjective choices become the criteria of behavior.

4. As Bishops you have a duty to safeguard and proclaim the values of religious life, in order that they may be faithfully preserved and passed on within the life of your diocesan communities. Poverty and self-possession, consecrated chastity and fruitfulness, obedience and freedom: these paradoxes proper to the consecrated life need to be better understood and more fully appreciated by the whole Church, and in particular by those who have a part in educating the faithful. The theology and spirituality of the consecrated life need to be a part of the training of diocesan priests, just as attention to the theology of the particular Church and to the spirituality of the diocesan clergy should be included in the formation of consecrated persons (cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 50).

In your contacts with religious, you will point to the importance of their community witness and show your willingness to help in whatever way possible to ensure that communities have the spiritual and material means to live the common life serenely and joyfully (cf. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Fraternal Life in Community*, February 2, 1994). One of the most valuable services that a Bishop can provide is to ensure that good and experienced spiritual guides and confessors are available to religious, especially to monasteries of contemplative nuns and motherhouses with many members. Likewise, an Institute’s capacity to conduct a common or community apostolate is of vital concern to the life of a particular Church. It is not enough that all members of an Institute subscribe to the same general values, or work “according to the founding spirit”, with each one responsible for finding some place of apostolic activity and a residence. Obviously not every member of an Institute will be suited to work in only one apostolate, but the identity and nature of the common apostolate, and the willingness to engage in it, should be an essential part of an Institute’s discerning of the vocation of its candidates. Only when a Diocese can rely on a religious Institute’s commitment to a community apostolate can it engage seriously in long-range pastoral planning. Where Institutes are already engaged in community apostolates such as education and health care, they should be encouraged and helped to persevere. Sensitivity to new needs and to the new poor, however necessary and laudable, should not entail neglect of the old poor, those in need of genuine Catholic education, the sick and the elderly. You should also encourage religious to give explicit attention to the specifically Catholic dimension of their activities. Only on this basis will Catholic schools and centers of higher learning be able to promote a culture imbued with Catholic values

and morality; only in this way will Catholic health-care facilities ensure that the sick and needy are taken care of “for the sake of Christ” and according to Catholic moral and ethical principles.

5. In many Dioceses consecrated life is facing the challenge of declining numbers and advancing age. The Bishops of the United States have already shown their readiness to lend assistance, and the Catholic faithful have demonstrated great generosity in providing financial support for religious Institutes with particular needs in this area. Religious communities themselves need to reaffirm their confidence in their calling and, relying on the help of the Holy Spirit, re-propose the ideal of consecration and mission. A presentation of the evangelical counsels merely in terms of their usefulness and convenience for a particular form of service is not enough. It is only personal experience, through faith, of Christ and of the mystery of his kingdom at work in human history which can make the ideal come alive in the minds and hearts of those who may be called. At the approach of the new Millennium, the Church urgently needs a vital and appealing religious life that shows forth concretely the sovereignty of God and bears witness before the world to the transcendent value of the “total gift of self in the profession of the evangelical counsels” (*Vita Consecrata*, 16), a gift which overflows in contemplation and service. This is surely the kind of challenge to which young people will respond. If it is true that the person becomes himself or herself through the sincere gift of self (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 24), then there should be no hesitation in calling the young to consecration. It is in fact a call to full human and Christian maturity and fulfilment.

Perhaps the Great Jubilee might be an occasion for Institutes of consecrated life to set up and support new communities of their members who are seeking an authentic, stable and community centered experience according to the spirit of the Founders and Foundresses. In many cases this would permit religious to commit themselves more serenely to these goals, free from burdens and problems which ultimately cannot be resolved.

6. The two-thousandth anniversary of the birth of the Savior invites the whole Church to be absorbed with bringing Christ to the world. She must proclaim his victory over sin and death, a victory brought about in his Blood on the Cross, and every day made truly present in the Eucharist. We know that genuine hope for the future of the human family lies in presenting clearly to the world the incarnate Son of God as the exemplar of all human life. Religious in particular should be ready to make this proclamation in openness to the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit and with complete inner freedom from any residual fear of displeasing the “world”, understood as a culture which promises a liberation and salvation different from those of Christ. This is no vain triumphalism or presumption, for in every age Christ is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24). In our day, as throughout the history of the Church, consecrated women and men stand out as living icons of what it means to make the following of Jesus the whole purpose of one’s life and to be transformed by his grace. In fact, as the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* points out: religious “have set out on a journey of continual conversion, of exclusive dedication to the love of God and of [their] brothers and sisters, in order to bear ever more splendid witness to

the grace which transfigures Christian life" (No. 109). Because Christ will never fail his Church, religious have "not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also a great history still to be accomplished!" (*ibid.*, 110).

Dear Brother Bishops, through you I earnestly exhort the women and men religious who have borne the "burden of the day and the scorching heat" (Mt 20:12) to persevere in their faithful witness. There is a way of living the Cross with bitterness and sadness, but it breaks our spirit. There is also the way of carrying the Cross as Christ did, and then we perceive clearly that it leads "into glory" (cf. Lk 24:26). Through you, I appeal to all consecrated persons, and to the men and women who may be thinking of entering a community, to renew each day their awareness of the extraordinary privilege that is theirs: the call to serve the holiness of God's People, to "be holiness" in the heart of the Church.

With your leadership and guidance, the future of the consecrated life in your country will certainly be glorious and fruitful. May the Blessed Virgin Mary, who, since she belongs completely to God and is totally devoted to him, is the sublime example of perfect consecration, accompany the renewal and the new flourishing of the consecrated life in the United States. To you and to the priests, religious and laity of your Dioceses, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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