



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
(NEW ENGLAND AND THE ECCLESIASTICAL PROVINCES
OF BOSTON AND HARTFORD)**

24 October 1998

*Dear Cardinal Law,
Dear Brother Bishops,*

1. I warmly greet you, the Bishops of New England, comprising the ecclesiastical provinces of Boston and Hartford. During this year I have had the spiritual joy of meeting practically all the Pastors of the Church in the United States of America, representing over two hundred jurisdictions, including those of the Eastern-rite Catholic Churches. As we come to the end of this series of *ad Limina* visits, I “give thanks to God always for you because of the grace which has been given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you have been enriched in him” (cf. 1 Cor 1:4-5). We have prayed together and listened to one another, seeking to take stock of all the good which the Holy Spirit inspires among the People of God in your country. Apart from strengthening the bonds of communion between us, these visits have enabled us to reflect, in an atmosphere of pilgrimage and prayerful calm, on the opportunities for evangelization and apostolate which lie before the Church in the United States in the light of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the approaching Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

2. Occasions such as the Great Jubilee remind us of all that God has done in history, and they prompt us to look to the future, confident in the Lord’s promise that he will be with us always, “to the close of the age” (Mt 28:20). Christians know that time is neither a mere succession of days, months and years, nor a cosmic cycle of eternal return. Time is a great drama with a beginning and an end, authored and directed by God’s providential care: “Within the dimension of time the

world was created; within it the history of salvation unfolds, finding its culmination in the 'fullness of time' of the Incarnation, and its goal in the glorious return of the Son of God at the end of time" (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 10). The Easter Vigil reminds us that the Resurrection is "the true fulcrum of history, to which the mystery of the world's origin and its final destiny leads" (*Dies Domini*, 2). Only in the light of the Risen Christ do we come to understand the true meaning of our personal pilgrimage through time to our eternal destiny. This is the message which the Church must proclaim today and always. She does so above all in the Liturgy, which celebrates the history of salvation and is the privileged place for our encounter with the Father and the One whom he has sent, Jesus Christ. She does so in her *kerygma* and catechesis, which make known the saving teaching of the Gospel in dialogue with the human heart's profound aspiration for something divine and eternal, something supremely good that will not slip away. And she does so in her works of charity, which seek to heal the brokenness of human lives by the healing touch of Christian love.

3. In my talks to the Bishops - addressed not only to the Bishops present on each occasion but to your entire Conference - I have tried to reflect on aspects of your Episcopal ministry which can open the door to the great springtime of Christianity which God is preparing as we enter the Third Christian Millennium, and of which we can already see the first signs (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 86). Together we have conversed about many features of the life of the Catholic community in the United States, blessed by the genuine holiness of so many of its members, marked by a deep thirst for justice, steadfast and active in all the various forms of Christian service. As Bishops you are well aware of the strengths of your people. Like the wise man of the Gospel, you must calculate how with the energies and means available you can face the urgent needs of the present time (cf. Lk 14:31). Today I believe the Lord is saying to us all: do not hesitate, do not be afraid to engage the good fight of the faith (cf. 1 Tim 6:12). When we preach the liberating message of Jesus Christ we are offering the words of life to the world (cf. Jn 6:68). Our prophetic witness is an urgent and essential service not just to the Catholic community but to the whole human family. For in the Gospel the true story of the world is told, its history and its future, which is life within the communion of the Holy Trinity.

At the end of the second millennium humanity stands at a kind of crossroads. As Pastors responsible for the life of the Church, we need to meditate deeply on the signs of a new spiritual crisis, whose dangers are apparent not only at the personal level but regarding civilization itself (cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 68). If this crisis deepens, utilitarianism will increasingly reduce human beings to objects for manipulation. If the moral truth revealed in the dignity of the human person does not discipline and direct the explosive energies of technology, a new era of barbarism, rather than a springtime of hope, may well follow this century of tears (cf. *Speech to the United Nations*, October 5, 1995, No. 18).

In addressing the United Nations General Assembly in 1995, I proposed that in order to recover our hope and our trust on the threshold of a new century "we must regain sight of that

transcendent horizon of possibility to which the soul of man aspires” (*ibid.*, No. 16). Because the spiritual crisis of our times is in fact a flight from the transcendent mystery of God, it is at the same time a flight from the truth about the human person, God’s noblest creation on earth. The culture of our day seeks to build without reference to the architect, ignoring the biblical warning: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Ps 127:1). In doing so, a certain part of contemporary culture misses the depth and richness of the human mystery, and life itself is thereby impoverished, being divested of meaning and joy. No demand on our ministry is more urgent than the “new evangelization” needed to satisfy the spiritual hunger of our times. We must not hesitate before the challenge of communicating the joy of being Christian, of being “in Christ”, in the state of grace with God, and of being united with the Church. This is what can truly satisfy the human heart and its aspiration to freedom.

4. Nowhere is the contrast between the Gospel vision and contemporary culture more obvious than in the dramatic conflict between the culture of life and the culture of death. I do not wish to end this series of meetings without once more thanking the Bishops for their leadership and advocacy in support of human life, particularly the lives of the most vulnerable. The Church in your country reaches out in the defense and promotion of human life and human dignity in numerous ways. Through countless organizations and agencies she is an immensely generous provider of social services to the poor; active in support of laws more favorable to the immigrant, present in the public debate on capital punishment, aware that in the modern state the cases in which the execution of an offender is an absolute necessity are very rare, if not practically nonexistent (cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 56; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2267). At the same time you rightly underscore the priority that must be given to the fundamental right to life of the unborn, and to opposition to euthanasia and physician- assisted suicide. The witness of so many United States Catholics - including countless young people - in the service of “the Gospel of life” is a sure sign of hope for the future, and a reason for us to be thankful to the Holy Spirit who inspires so much good among the faithful.

5. In response to the spiritual crisis of our times, I am convinced that there is a radical need for a healing of the mind as well as of the heart. The violent history of this century is due in no small part to the closure of reason to the existence of ultimate and objective truth. The result has been a pervasive skepticism and relativism, which have not led to a more “mature” humanity but to much despair and irrationality. In the Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, published only last week, I wished to defend the capacity of human reason to know the truth. This confidence in reason is an integral part of the Catholic intellectual tradition, but it needs reaffirming today in the face of a widespread and doctrinaire doubt about our ability to answer the fundamental questions: Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going to? Why is there evil? What is there after this life? (cf. *Fides et Ratio*, 3 and 5). Many people have been led to believe that the only truths are those which can be demonstrated by experience or scientific experimentation. The result is a tendency to reduce the domain of rational inquiry to technological, instrumental, utilitarian, functional and sociological dimensions of things. A relativistic and pragmatic vision of truth has emerged. An

undifferentiated plurality, based on the assumption that all positions are equally valid, replaces a legitimate pluralism of positions in dialogue (cf. *ibid.*, 5). One of the most striking indications of the contemporary lack of confidence in truth is the tendency found among some to rest content with partial and provisional truths, “no longer seeking to ask the meaning and ultimate foundation of human, personal and social existence” (*ibid.*). By being satisfied with experimental and incomplete knowledge, reason fails to do justice to the mystery of the human person, made for the truth and deeply desirous of knowing the truth.

The consequences for the faith of this widespread attitude are serious. If reason cannot attain ultimate truths, faith loses its reasonable and intelligible character and is reduced to the realm of the non-definable, the sentimental and the irrational. The outcome is fideism. Detached from its relationship to human reason, faith loses its public and universal validity and is limited to the subjective and private sphere. In the end, theological faith is destroyed. On the basis of these concerns, I considered it important to write the Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, addressed to you, the Bishops of the Church, the principal witnesses to divine and catholic truth (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 25). My wish is to encourage you, as Bishops, always to keep open the horizon of your ministry, beyond the immediate tasks of your daily pastoral toil, to that deep and universal thirst for the truth which is found in every human heart.

6. The dialogue of the Church with contemporary culture is part of your “*diakonia* of the truth” (*Fides et Ratio*, 2). You must do all you can to raise the level of philosophical and theological reflection, not only in seminaries and Catholic institutions (cf. *ibid.*, 62), but also among Catholic intellectuals and all those who seek a deeper understanding of reality. As we approach the new millennium, the Church’s defense of the human person requires a firm and open defense of the capacity of human reason to reach definitive truths concerning God, concerning man himself, concerning freedom and concerning ethical behavior. Only through reasoned reflection, open to the fundamental questions of existence and free from reductive pre-suppositions, can society discover sure points of reference on which to build a secure foundation for the lives of individuals and communities. Faith and reason in cooperation manifest the grandeur of the human being, “who can find fulfilment only in choosing to enter the truth, to make a home under the shade of Wisdom and dwell there” (*ibid.*, 107). The Church's long intellectual tradition is born of her confidence in the goodness of creation and the ability of reason to grasp metaphysical and moral truths. Collaboration between faith and reason, and the continued involvement of Christian thinkers in philosophy, are essential elements of the cultural and intellectual renewal that you must foster in your country.

7. In closing this series of *ad Limina* visits with the American Bishops, I wish to express my warmest personal appreciation to you for the spiritual communion, solidarity and support which you have shown me during the twenty years of my Pontificate. I too feel that I am your friend and elder brother on the pilgrimage of faith and fidelity which together we are making in devotion to Christ and service of his Church. To the priests, religious and laity of the United States I express

once more my cordial esteem and gratitude, asking the Holy Spirit to give your local Churches a new outpouring of life and energy for the mission still to be fulfilled. I pray that there will be a continuing and all-embracing renewal of unity and love among all American Catholics, of reconciliation and mutual support in the truth of faith. I ask God to bless your efforts in the ecumenical dialogue with other Christians, and in interreligious cooperation on the basis of the many fundamental points of contact we share with all believers. My fervent prayer is that there will be a fresh spirit of goodness, harmony and peace among all the people of the United States, so that your public life may be renewed in truthfulness and honor, and your country may carry out its historical destiny among the peoples of the world.

Commending you and your brother Bishops to the loving care of Mary Immaculate, Heavenly Patron of the United States of America, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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