



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF GUATEMALA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Tuesday, 29 May 2001

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I am pleased to receive you, Pastors of the Church of God in Guatemala, who have come to Rome for your ad limina visit, during which you meet the Successor of Peter, maintain the appropriate contact with various dicasteries of the Roman Curia and pray at the tombs of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, pillars of the Church, so that with such strength you may continue in your mission as heads and guides of the pilgrim People of God in the "country of eternal springtime".

I am grateful to Archbishop Martínez Contreras of Los Altos-Quetzaltenago-Totonicapán, President of the Bishops' Conference, for his cordial words expressing your communion with the Bishop of Rome and the sentiments that motivate you in your pastoral action for the beloved Guatemalan people. I witnessed their rich values on the occasion of my two apostolic visits to your country which took place in very different circumstances. During my first visit the nation was living in a state of merciless internal fighting, whereas during the second one, horizons of peace, which I wanted to encourage, could already be glimpsed. I always felt pleasure in meeting a lively, enthusiastic Church close to everyone and seriously involved in announcing Jesus Christ and his Good News.

2. As Bishops, your fundamental mission is to build your communities on the rock that is Christ (cf. I Cor 10,4), by preaching God's Word, by celebrating the sacraments and by furthering charity. Encouraged by the Lord's promises and by the strength his Spirit instils in you, you are called to be the first to bring to completion the mission entrusted to his Church, even if to this end you must face and accept the Cross, which in contemporary society can manifest itself in many forms.

Both individually and as a group, through the Bishops' Conference and other ecclesial institutions, you are involved in analyzing the successes and expectations of Guatemalan society; you seek to interpret them in the light of the Gospel, to guide society and help it advance in the area of moral values, especially by fostering national reconciliation for which there is so great a need after the bloodstained years of the civil war.

Hearing what "the Spirit says to the churches" (Apoc 2,7), you also feel it your duty to make a serene, open and understanding discernment of the various circumstances and events, initiatives and projects, without neglecting society's serious problems and highest aspirations. I therefore encourage you to continue tirelessly and without losing heart in the office of teaching and proclaiming the Gospel of Christ to men and women (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 11), working out and implementing a suitable pastoral plan (cf. *Ecclesia in America*, n. 36). You are heavily burdened by responsibilities but the Lord's Spirit will enlighten you and will always give you the strength you need.

3. In the first place, you can count on your priests' help in carrying out your mission. Contemporary society, which is so varied, requires the priest to be a sign of communion and to exercise his ministry with humility and pastoral charity, leading the faithful to encounter Jesus Christ (cf. *Ecclesia in America*, n. 39). Knowing how you exercise your ministry, I thank God for your spirit of brotherhood and sacrifice, for your witness of austerity and poverty, and for your generous dedication to the service of your brethren. I know that in some areas your pastoral work has to contend with particular difficulties, and this requires a very great availability. As I said in my *Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday* this year, yours is "work that is often hidden and, without making headlines, causes the kingdom of God to advance in people's minds and hearts", which is why I tell you once again of "my admiration for this ministry, discreet, tenacious and creative, even if it is sometimes watered by those tears of the soul which only God sees" (n. 3).

If the service of priests is to be ever more effective in facing the challenges to evangelization of the contemporary world, they need to have a solid spirituality, to imitate Christ the Good Shepherd and to undergo a continuing formation that will prepare them better each day to pass on the Gospel message. In this regard, I am pleased that as part of the Guatemalan Bishops' Conference Overall Plan, you have set up the Commission for the Clergy and Pastoral Care of Priests, which has published the National Plan for the Pastoral Care of Priests 2001-2006. In the context of these programmes, be alert to the specific situations of each one and offer them all the help they need, encouraging them to continue with joy and hope on the journey of priestly holiness. May none of your priests lack the necessary means to live his sublime vocation and his ministry!

4. In your quinquennial reports, you emphasized the esteem and gratitude of your particular Churches for the gift of the consecrated life. In fact, there is a consistent presence of men and women religious in Guatemala which contributes to evangelization, either through direct pastoral work in the parishes, or through various forms of educational or charitable apostolates.

The Church appreciates the willingness and ability of men and women religious to respond promptly to the challenges of spreading the Good News, while at the same time she recalls that their consecrated life is a privileged means of evangelization. This is why I remind them of the need always to develop a "dynamic fidelity" to their own charism (cf. *Vita consecrata*, n. 37). I would also like to underline the Bishops' responsibility to safeguard and protect the rich spiritual heritage of every institute (cf. *Code of Canon Law*, Can. 586, 2), responding "to the gift of the consecrated life which the Spirit awakens in the particular Churches, by welcoming it with generosity and thanksgiving" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 48). Furthermore, in the face of the widespread need for spirituality, which can be considered as one of the "signs of the times" at the beginning of this millennium (cf. *Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 33), a witness of authentically evangelical life in conformity with their original charism is expected of consecrated people and will certainly enrich every particular Church, helping to keep alive the sense of God's presence and fostering in all the faithful "a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and personal renewal in a context of ever more intense prayer" (*Tertio Millennio adveniente*, n. 42; *Vita consecrata*, n. 39).

5. Even if "the Church's mission of salvation in the world is realized not only by the ministers in virtue of the Sacrament of Orders but also by all the lay faithful" (*Christifideles laici*, n. 23), there can be no doubt that ordained ministers have a fundamental role in this mission. I would therefore like to share in your concern for the promotion of vocations to the priesthood and for their formation as the future Pastors of the People of God.

This important topic demands constant reflection and a new and determined commitment on the part of all Christian communities, under the guidance of those whom "the Holy Spirit has made [their] guardians, to feed the Church of the Lord" (Acts 20, 28). The approach to vocations promotion must be based on the Lord's personal call to the following of Christ and to the ministry through the Church's fruitfulness and the depth of her life, nourished by the purity of faith, the grace of the sacraments, the spirit of conversion and the fervent prayer of the members of Christ's Mystical Body. Everyone must therefore participate in some way in the vocations ministry, trusting that God will respond by providing his People with the necessary ministers, if they but persevere in praying for them.

It is also important to keep in mind that a privileged context for vocations promotion is the pastoral care of young people, directed to the doctrinal, spiritual and apostolic formation of them in parishes and schools as well as in apostolic associations and movements. In this field an integral and consistent formation is fundamental, and should be based on closeness to Christ who prepares those who are chosen to receive the grace of the gift joyfully.

The witness of priestly fidelity, into whose ministry the newly ordained will be integrated, is an important factor in the formation of seminarians. Responding generously and with an undivided love to their "vocation to the priesthood", priests will be a model of pastoral charity, of prayer, of self-sacrifice and dedication to the young candidates to Holy Orders.

6. I am pleased to see how you lead your people in their search for a harmonious and peaceful coexistence, based on the values of reconciliation, justice, solidarity and freedom. Therefore, when necessary, do not avoid reporting injustice and presenting the moral principles that must also guide the way they are practised in civil life.

The Church in Guatemala has seen the blood of many of her children spilled. In addition to the legitimate effort to uncover the truth of these execrable crimes - including the assassination of Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera, Auxiliary of Guatemala, who was killed three years ago - it is urgent that "their example of boundless dedication to the cause of the Gospel" (*Ecclesia in America*, n. 15) be saved from oblivion. In this regard, I would like to recall what I previously said in your land on 6 February 1996 at Campo Marte: "I would now like to pay a warm and well-deserved tribute to the hundreds of catechists who, together with some priests, risked their lives and even offered them up for the Gospel. With their blood they have made the blessed land of Guatemala fruitful forever. This fecundity must bear fruit in united and profoundly Christian families, in evangelizing parishes and communities, and in numerous priestly, religious and missionary vocations. Imitating Mary's courage and integrity, they "have conquered ... by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death' (Apoc 12,11)" (n. 4).

7. On the other hand, spreading the Church's social teaching acquires a dimension of "authentic pastoral priority" (*Ecclesia in America*, n. 54), both in order to face the different situations adequately and with a clear conscience illumined by faith, and to encourage and direct the involvement of lay people in public life. Indeed, denunciations and the theoretical pronouncements of principles serve little purpose if they are not firmly interiorized through an integral and systematic formation. In this way a channel is opened for the real, concrete incidence of the values inspired by the Gospel in the worlds of culture, technology, economics and politics.

In addition to formation which is essential to the growth in faith of every Christian, an effort should also be made to evangelize those with responsibilities in the various sectors of public administration. Given that the Gospel has something to say to them too, we need to help them discover that Jesus' message is also applicable and relevant to the roles they exercise (cf. *Ecclesia in America*, n. 67).

8. It is well-known that in Guatemala it is mainly the catechists who are responsible for spreading God's Word. I have seen how in your quinquennial reports you praise their self-denial and self-sacrificing work. I warmly thank them for this service, which is part of their mission in the Church.

One particularly suitable way for the lay faithful to satisfy the great hopes that the Church places in them in their own specific tasks is an appropriate organization that will facilitate the formation and gradual incorporation of the new generations, reciprocal help and coordinated apostolic action. In this regard, the emergence of various lay movements can be a gratifying phenomenon that

deserves special attention from the Bishops who are asked, as the Apostle St Paul says, "Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good" (I Thes 5,19-21). In this way, with the help of their Pastors and in perfect communion with them, a vigorous laity will be forged that is firmly committed to the path of personal holiness, to the construction of the Church and to building a more just society.

It will also be an effective means of overcoming religious ignorance and strengthening faith, at times merely a habit, making the baptized less vulnerable to the proselytizing advances of the sects and offering others spiritual support (cf. *Ecclesia in America*, n. 73).

9. At the end of this meeting, I would like to encourage you to continue, with your typical energy and enthusiasm and with renewed hope, in carrying out the mission the Lord has entrusted to you. Please convey my affection and my spiritual closeness to your priests, your religious and all the Guatemalan faithful who go joyfully forth to meet the Lord. In this regard I recall that "many are the paths on which each one of us and each of our Churches must travel, but there is no distance between those who are united in the same communion, the communion which is daily nourished at the table of the Eucharistic Bread and the Word of Life" (*Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 58).

May the Blessed Virgin, Mother of the Church, accompany you on your way and comfort you with her motherly tenderness always. May you also be supported by the Apostolic Blessing which I gladly impart to you and extend to all your particular Churches.