



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF BRAZIL'S EASTERN REGION
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Thursday, 5 September 2002

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. In this high-point of your episcopal ministry, the visit *ad limina*, I am delighted to welcome you who exercise your pastoral mission in the Church in the Eastern Region of Brazil, in which are located the dioceses of the State of Rio de Janeiro and the "Union of S. João Maria Vianney", that I wished to establish in Campos as a Personal Apostolic Administration. You have come together at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, to increase in your hearts the apostolic zeal that motivated and led them here as witnesses to the Gospel of Christ, thereby accepting to offer the total gift of themselves. Meeting the Bishop of Rome and his collaborators, you also wish to manifest your communion with the Successor of Peter and with the universal Church. May the Lord bless this initiative and support you in your service to the people who are entrusted to your care.

In thanking Cardinal Eugênio Sales for the words he used to express your sentiments of affection and devotion to me, I want to greet all of you who are present and, through you, I greet the priests, men and women religious, catechists and zealous laity of your dioceses. May the Lord grant them strength and boldness in every way to be faithful witnesses of the love of God.

2. The Archdioceses of Niterói and Rio de Janeiro have both rich and dynamic histories. In the latter, from the dawn of the history of Brazil, stretching from when my venerable Predecessor Pope Gregory XIII on 19 July 1575 created the Prelature of São Sebastião until today, the Catholic Church has promoted many pastoral initiatives thanks to the generous dedication of such eminent pastors as Cardinals Arcoverde, Sebastião Leme, Jaime de Barros Câmara and Eugênio Sales, to name a few. The See of Peter wishes to pay homage to all those who as Prelates, Bishops and Archbishops of both Archdioceses, have served the cause of the Kingdom of God among the people of this great nation, making the seeds of the Word grow to become a rich fertile tree (cf. Mt 13,31-32). In line with this tradition, I express the wish that this region continue to exercise a

positive influence on the whole Church in Brazil, promoting an intense spirit of communion with the national Episcopate and with the Holy See. This is a wonderful occasion to extend my best wishes to the Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, Archbishop Eusébio Oscar Scheid, who is beginning his mission as new Pastor of the Archdiocese.

3. As I extend these best wishes, I want to offer a few considerations on the absolute priority of the role of seminaries in the formation of the future priests of Brazil for a renewed and missionary pastoral ministry.

I distinctly recall the famous meeting of 1992 with the Episcopate of South America in Santo Domingo. On that occasion, the themes on the agenda embraced circumstances and ecclesial situations that went beyond the strict limits of one or even several nations. I envisaged the meeting as the necessary place to deal with these themes. On that occasion I said that "an indispensable condition of the new evangelization is its being able to count on many qualified evangelists.

Therefore, *the promotion of vocations to the priesthood and religious life*, as well as for other types of pastoral service, must be a priority for the bishops and a commitment involving the whole People of God" (*Inaugural Discourse*, n. 26; *ORE* 21 October 1992, n. 26, p. 9).

Almost 10 years have gone by and there is no doubt that a great deal has been done along these lines, especially in your country, where the population has grown with increasing speed and the obligation of drawing up new ecclesial boundaries has struggled to keep pace with such expansion.

While we ponder the immensity of Brazil and the scarcity of priests, your immediate collaborators in the prophetic, priestly and kingly ministry, I desire to share with you, as the one who is to confirm the faith of his brothers, this problem of the universal Church. Our sentiments must be those of the Lord who "seeing the crowds felt compassion for them" and said: "The harvest is great but the labourers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into his harvest" (Mt 9,37-38). By means of prayer, human weakness is transformed into divine power because we can do all things in him who strengthens us (cf. Phil 4,13).

With the power of God and with the wise use of human resources we will discover the secret of obtaining good results. They are wise pastors who combine their resources either by means of diocesan seminaries open to seminarians from other dioceses or by means of interdiocesan seminaries, provided they follow an orientation based on a clear and avowed communion with the norms of the universal Church. They are wise pastors who do not hesitate to put into the formation of priests their best "cultivators" who are intellectually, spiritually and pastorally prepared so that they, in adequate number, might constitute the group giving formation that the Church needs in each seminary. While trying to increase the number of vocations, in the light of the immensity of the harvest, it is a wise policy *to reinforce the centres of formation* and praiseworthy prudence for

the bishops to foster the *quality of formation*.

4. Doubtless, it has been a constant concern of this Apostolic See, along with the the Pastors and the National Conference of the Bishops of Brazil, to face the need to create or revive seminaries in a number of the ecclesiastical provinces. In fact, it is in the Northeast region of the country that one finds concentrated the greatest efforts in this regard due to the precarious economic situation of the area and the resulting hardship for the Bishops to ensure the adequate and efficient operation of their seminaries. In this situation, the commitment to making the structural resources, however minimal, available for the recruitment, selection and formation of the priestly vocations that are urgently needed is certainly to be praised. For this reason I have followed the development of what could very well be a true "campaign" in favour of the Seminary in Brazil.

5. In reality, this problem is not totally absent in those regions where the best formational and material structures exist. As I have said before, it is not enough to reinforce the centres of formation, if one does not also insist on the ecclesial spirit that must permeate the seminary and on the *quality of the teaching*. The generosity and good will of all, and the living resources of the diocese, can more than compensate for the lack of material means; for this reason, I ask God that he reward all those who give themselves and never spare themselves when it comes to helping the seminaries, that will always operate with an operational deficit.

At this point it is good to turn the eyes of faith to examine the state of priestly vocations. On the one hand, we are facing the comforting reality of an increase in the quantity and quality of priestly vocations. There are many valid new experiences such as vocation days, vocation discernment programmes and assistance offered to potential candidates even before they enter the seminary and many others. There is the consoling phenomenon of an increase of vocations in the dioceses whose seminaries seek to follow faithfully the direction of the Second Vatican Council, of the Holy See and particularly, and in the application of the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, that insists on the development of the human-affective dimension, as well as the spiritual, intellectual and pastoral. The Basic Directives of the CNBB (n. 55) have furnished valid guidance for this purpose.

On the other hand, however, the impact of the modern world, with its secular and hedonist tendencies, effecting young people, above all, will have to be faced with greater decisiveness in order to renew and cultivate in those who have a vocation the profound love of Christ and of his Kingdom. It is fundamental to offer a solid formation in the life of *prayer* and of the *Liturgy*, through which the Church participates even now in the liturgy of the Glory of heaven.

For this reason, fidelity to the doctrine of priestly celibacy for the Kingdom of heaven must be treated with great esteem by the Church, above all in the context of priestly life (cf. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 16) when one deals with discerning in candidates for the priesthood the call to a full and unconditional gift of self. It is necessary to remind them that celibacy is not an extrinsic and useless element - a *superstructure* - of their priesthood, but an intimate means for participating in

the dignity of Christ and in serving the new humanity that originates in and through him and that he leads to fullness.

It is my duty therefore to recommend a renewed attentiveness in the selection of vocations for the seminary, with the use of all available means for coming to an adequate knowledge of the candidates, above all, from the moral and affective point of view. Let no bishop feel excluded from this duty of conscience for which he will have to render an account directly to God. It would be deplorable that, by a mistaken act of tolerance, he would ordain young men who are immature or exhibit clear signs of affective disorders, who, as is sadly known, could cause serious confusion in the consciousness of the faithful with obvious harm for the whole Church.

The existence in some theological faculties, or even in seminaries, of professors who are poorly prepared, who also live in dissent from the Church creates great sadness and concern. We trust in the mercy of God who guides the consciences of generous young men, but it is not acceptable for young men in formation to be exposed to deviations in formation personnel and professors who are not in explicit ecclesial communion or who give no obvious witness to the quest for holiness. Even Apostolic Visitations to the seminaries will have no real lasting effect unless the bishops proceed decisively to introduce immediately the changes requested by the Visitor. It is also fitting that the bishops who send seminarians into the seminaries of another diocese or province should know well the spirit of the seminary and support it entirely.

6. It is not superfluous to repeat that by means of "theology, the future priest assents to the word of God, grows in his spiritual life and prepares himself to fulfil his pastoral ministry" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 51). Hence we perceive the importance of maintaining a careful and vigilant guidance of the whole life of the seminarians, but especially in their theological studies, because it is the duty of the bishop to safeguard the sound doctrine taught in the seminary.

Along with Christology, ecclesiology is today in particular the cornerstone of the sound formation of candidates for the priesthood. The study and teaching of theology entail requirements that flow from its very nature; without a doubt, one of these is that theology in the Church must maintain its own identity that does not depend intrinsically upon the historical moment through which we are now passing.

The certainly legitimate and necessary endeavours to bring together the Christian message and the mentality and sensitivity of the modern person, to expound the truth of faith with instruments borrowed from modern philosophy and the positive sciences, and taking as a starting point the contemporary situation of the person and of society, could if not carefully checked out, threaten the very nature of theology and even the content of faith. It is necessary that reason, under the movement of the Word of God and of its greater depth of knowledge, be guided to avoid "the paths which would lead it to stray from revealed truth" (Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio*, n. 73).

In some parts of the world, and it seems even in Brazil, in certain faculties or institutes of theology, a mutilated vision of the Church, shaped by certain prevailing ideologies, was defended, forgetting the essential element: *that the Church is the participation in the mystery of the incarnate Christ*. This is why it is important to insist that theology preserve in the Church its own identity.

It seems, therefore, that the principle expressed in the Conciliar assembly was truly prophetic, namely, that *the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation* must be the point of convergence of the various theological disciplines (cf. Decree *Optatam totius*, n. 16). The subject of the Church, as divine mystery, is not only the essence of the first chapter of *Lumen gentium*, but it permeates the entire document. The bishops should adopt an attitude of vigilance so that the teaching of theology not be reduced to a human vision of the Church in the world.

That does not prevent one from confirming the pastoral objective of theological studies so that "every program of instruction, whether spiritual, intellectual, or disciplinary, should be joined with practical implementation and directed toward the aforementioned pastoral goal. In loyal obedience to the authority of the bishop, let all directors and teachers energetically and harmoniously bend their efforts to the pursuit of this objective" (*Optatam totius*, n. 4).

In the final analysis, this takes us to the formal element that is at the heart of theology, i.e. its *missionary nature* (*missionarietà*). The Council was very explicit about this when, in the Decree *Ad gentes* on missionary activity, it exhorted the professors of seminaries and universities to bring out in an explicit way in the dogmatic, biblical, moral and historical disciplines "the missionary aspects contained therein. In this way a missionary awareness can be formed in future priests" (n. 39). The adequate formation of seminarians will bring great benefits to the Church both in her work of evangelization and in the work of genuine human advancement.

7. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, at the end of our meeting, I address myself again to your beloved country, and, in particular, I invite the sons and daughters of your region of the State of Rio and its capital, each one with his/her own responsibility, to be devoted to building the Kingdom of God in this world.

At this beginning of the millennium, I hope for all a time of grace that signals a second spring of Christian life and allows everyone to respond boldly to the call of the Spirit. I entrust to the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, your ministry and the life of your ecclesial communities, so that she may guide your steps towards her Son, Jesus. Most happily, I impart to you the Apostolic Blessing which I extend to your priests and seminarians, men and women religious, catechists and all the diocesan laity.