



# The Holy See

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***ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE THIRD GROUP OF FRENCH BISHOPS  
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT***

*Thursday, 18 December 2003*

*Your Eminence,*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,*

1. In this season of Advent in which the Church waits in hope for the coming of the Saviour, I am pleased to greet you, the Bishops and the Diocesan Administrator who have come from the Ecclesiastical Province of Marseilles, as well as the Archbishop of Monaco. I offer you my cordial greetings. Like the Apostle Paul you have come "to visit Cephas" (Gal 1: 18), to strengthen the bonds of communion that unite you to him and to report to him on the life of your Dioceses, evangelized by faith and by the missionary daring of witnesses in the early centuries. I thank Cardinal Bernard Panafieu, Archbishop of Marseilles, for his words, presenting the pastoral situations of your Province, rich in promise and pastoral dynamism, as well as your questions and concerns as Pastors. He has expressed your common desire to root your apostolic service in an ever greater acceptance of God's grace and deeper intimacy with Christ, at the service of the People of God entrusted to your care. I hope that your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles and your meetings with the various offices of the Curia will enable you to return home strengthened in the desire to pursue your apostolic mission with joy.

2. At the end of the Great Jubilee of the Incarnation, I invited the whole Church to set out anew from Christ with the enthusiasm of Pentecost and renewed zeal, calling each of her members to walk with greater determination on the path of holiness through a life of prayer and listening to the Word of God with ever greater attention and love. New pastoral and missionary energy will flow from the renewal of the spiritual life of the pastors, faithful and entire communities. In this

perspective - and this is what I wish to discuss with you today - the people who are committed to consecrated life have an essential role to play. *Consecrated life* in all its forms, old and new, is a *gift of God for the Church*. We must never tire of asking the Lord to call men and women to follow him in a life of total self-giving. Your quinquennial reports demonstrate the generous attachment of your diocesan Churches to consecrated life, which delights me. In the dynamic of that event of grace which was the Synod on *consecrated life and its mission in the Church and in the world*, and referring to the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* which gathers its fruits, I would like to repeat to you with force and conviction that the Church and the world need the consecrated life. Indeed, a Diocese without communities of consecrated life "would not only be deprived of many spiritual gifts, of suitable places for people to seek God, of specific apostolic activities and pastoral approaches, but it would also risk a great weakening of that missionary spirit which is characteristic of the majority of Institutes" (*Vita Consecrata*, n. 48). I ask you first of all to convey to all the institutes and congregations the deep esteem and affectionate greetings of the Successor of Peter, assuring them of my prayers and inviting them not to despair of the Lord, who will never abandon his people.

3. The quinquennial reports from the different Dioceses of France emphasize the crisis that the consecrated life is going through in your Country. This is even more pronounced in the apostolic congregations, marked by the gradual but steady decline in the number of members in the various institutes present on French soil and the few candidates for the novitiate. This crisis also affects the aspect of many communities whose members are aging, with the inevitable consequences on the life of institutes, their witness, their administration and even the choices linked to their missions and the use of their resources. To survive, some institutes are even obliged to regroup with others in federations; this is not always an easy transition, given the different background of the communities. If these new groupings are to be successful, it would be wise to focus once again on the founding charisms and to remember that religious life is for the Church's mission and is based on Christ, who calls people to give themselves to him without reserve, in the perspective that St Paul mentions: it is God who gives growth to every undertaking (cf. I Cor 3: 4). To respond to the changes, whatever they may be, those in charge of institutes of consecrated life must pay more attention than ever to continuing formation, and especially the theological and spiritual formation of their members.

Many older congregations have courageously chosen to *acquire deeper knowledge of their charism* as well as to *renew their institutions*. They are taking special care to listen with great openness to the new calls of the Spirit and to coordinate their research with the Dioceses, to discern the urgent spiritual and missionary needs of the moment. Fortunately, it can be noted that the charisms of European institutes whose members are aging continue to respond to the deepest expectations of many young people from Africa, Asia or Latin America who desire to consecrate themselves generously to the Lord. I am also pleased that the congregations are concerned with *proposing their charism to lay people* of all ages and backgrounds and associating them with their mission; in this way they enable lay men and women to build their Christian life on a specific,

proven spirituality, and to be more deeply committed to serving their brothers and sisters. Such an initiative cannot fail also to have positive effects on the life of the respective religious institutes.

4. I therefore encourage you to spare no effort to "*promote the specific vocation and mission of the consecrated life, which belongs stably and solidly to the Church's life and sanctity*" (*Pastores Gregis*, n. 50). By their eloquent witness of consecration conformed to Christ in chastity, poverty and service at the centre of the human situations in which they are inserted, the members of institutes of consecrated life continue to be prophetic signs for the world and for the Church. By their existence they express God's love for every human being, keeping alive in the Church the requirement of recognizing the face of Christ in the face of the poor. They also invite diocesan communities to become increasingly aware of the universal character of the Church's mission, and remind them of the urgent need to seek first the Kingdom of God and his justice as well as ever greater brotherhood among men and women.

Allow me to acknowledge the outstanding work done by consecrated persons in France and in the poorest countries of the globe - particularly in Africa, a Continent to which your region is naturally oriented, as you have just recalled - in the *area of solidarity* with the marginalized, with illiterate children, with the youth on the streets, with those living the dramatic experience of a precarious situation or poverty, with persons with AIDS or those affected by other pandemics or again, with immigrants and displaced persons. Nor do I forget all the consecrated people who work in the context of *social service or the world of health care and education*, in France and elsewhere in the world. I cannot sufficiently encourage the superiors of congregations not to neglect or desert too hastily these essential places where human values and the Gospel are transmitted, and where the call to follow Christ and take part in the life of the Church can also be heard. Although today they are less obviously recognizable, communities nonetheless continue to carry out their mission courageously within the social fabric, cooperating with works of solidarity and as active champions of interreligious dialogue, to which you pay special attention. I know the patience and the great attention that in the name of their consecration to the Lord consecrated persons devote to the poorest of the poor and the marginalized in a society that all too often ignores them. In daily solidarity with life's wounded, they perform the indispensable creativity in charity for which I appealed to all Christian communities at the end of the Great Jubilee. This dimension of charity to the poorest and the lowliest is a pledge of credibility of the entire Church: the credibility of her message, but also the credibility of those who, captivated by Christ and having contemplated him, can see him in the faces of those with whom Christ himself wanted to identify and can express his compassion for every human being (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 49). *The young generations who thirst for the absolute need daring witnesses who call them to live the Gospel and generously devote themselves to the service of their brothers and sisters.* I invite you never to disregard the experience and prophetic charism of consecrated persons, sentinels of hope, witnesses of the absolute and of the joy of total self-giving. The Spirit impels them to stand beside the outcasts of our societies and to strive to set broken human beings back on their feet. In this way they help to build up charity in each particular Church.

5. For a better harmonization of pastoral activities, it is also important that the *institutional dialogue* with institutes of consecrated life, both at the national level within the French Bishops' Conference and the two Conferences of Major Superiors, and at the diocesan level between the Bishop or his delegate and the superiors of local congregations, permits an authentic dialogue and fruitful exchanges; in this way every institute of consecrated life, while preserving the specific character of its charism, way of life and own priorities, will be increasingly and more firmly integrated into the diocesan Church. This is essential at a time when your diocesan Churches are involved in pastoral developments that entail a certain number of adjustments connected with the new situations of the mission as well as with the cultural changes.

Among the activities that institutes of consecrated life are carrying out in society's midst, I would like to draw attention to the eminent part they play in *intellectual research* in your Country. Religious in France have often been beacons in this milieu, particularly in the first half of the 20th century and in the context of philosophy and theology. They were eager to highlight the reasons that must guide the behaviour and commitments of our contemporaries, clarifying the meaning of life. By making a relevant contribution to the quest for the truth, they can encourage an intellectual renewal and create fruitful relationships with the thinkers of today who deal with the essential questions of our time or who work in research. I would also like to mention the institutes or congregations involved in *communications, radio or television*. They participate in the public debate with a healthy and necessary confrontation, making a specifically Christian contribution to the great decisions that shape society's future in addition to communicating their own religious conviction.

6. In your Dioceses, consecrated life takes many forms, since it juxtaposes old and new communities. For their part *the new communities*, thanks to the energy of beginnings, indisputably give a new impetus to consecrated life as well as to the pastoral mission in the Dioceses. They are often more outgoing than the older institutes. They contribute to renewing community life, liturgical life and involvement in evangelization in various sectors. Such a situation is undoubtedly comparable to the reality in St Dominic or St Francis's time. *New religious communities represent an opportunity for the Church*. Helped by the Bishops who must be watchful, they still need to mature, to put down roots and, sometimes, organize themselves in accordance with the norms of canon law in force and conscious of the need for prudence. May they all remember that the spirit of dialogue, of fraternal collaboration at the service of Christ and of mission must ceaselessly prevail!

Free from rivalry or antagonism, religious communities with a long tradition will thus be stimulated by their own charism and new communities will remember that they "*are not alternatives* to already existing Institutions, which continue to hold the pre-eminent place assigned to them by tradition.... The older Institutes, many of which have been tested by the severest of hardships which they have accepted courageously down the centuries, can be enriched through dialogue and an exchange of gifts with the Foundations appearing in our own day" (*Vita Consecrata*, n. 62). I invite

each one to show fraternal love and to take the necessary steps to ensure that all forces work together for the unity of the one Body of Christ and share in the mission. For their part, *those in charge of the new communities must be alert* in their discernment of vocations at the human and spiritual levels. It will be to their advantage in this to consult trustworthy people with discernment experience on the human and spiritual planes, whether in institutes or in the local Churches. You should also take pains to separate clearly what belongs to the internal and external forums, in accordance with the Church's long and prudent practice. With respect for the autonomy proper to every religious community, it is nonetheless the task of Bishops to do their utmost to welcome, assist and support the whole group of religious institutes present in the Diocese. These in turn must collaborate confidently, each according to its own charism in the diocesan mission of the Church. At all times, but especially in difficult periods, it is right that the faithful all join forces to build the Church and to be in the world visible signs of the unity of God's people around the Pastors. The mission of the diocesan Church will gain from this in consistency and apostolic zeal.

7. Many of you stressed the important role that *communities of contemplative life* play in your Dioceses on account of their witness and prayer, raising the world to God and participating in the mystery of Christ and of the Church in mission after the example of St Thérèse of Lisieux. These privileged places of outreach and acceptance contribute to the apostolic fruitfulness of parishes, movements and services. For many young people and adults they are reference points, places where they can find sound bearings for building and strengthening their human and spiritual life, and for a strong experience of the Absolute of God. They are also havens of peace and silence in a hectic society. Many young people have found the time to listen to God's call and to prepare to respond to it in monasteries. Monasteries also play a precious role for Bishops and priests who can replenish in them their spiritual strength and find fraternal relations. I know that these communities are thoroughly integrated in the Dioceses, and in addition to giving hospitality to people on retreat, they welcome in particular numerous groups of children and young people who come to reflect on their faith, to learn how to pray or to prepare themselves to receive one of the sacraments of the Church. In this perspective, I urge monastic communities to be particularly attentive to the demand for spiritual formation by the men and women of our time, especially youth. I am delighted to know that in many monasteries, while preserving their enclosure, monks and nuns are concerned with being spiritual directors for the people who knock at their door. I hope that the communities of prayerful contemplatives will continue their witness in the Dioceses, inviting the faithful to root their life and action in prayer, the source of all missionary zeal.

8. I know of *the generosity of many young people in your Dioceses*, and I am sure that the Lord will continue to work in their hearts to enable them to respond generously to his specific call. Today I would like to encourage them not to be afraid to give themselves to the poor, chaste and obedient Christ in consecrated life, a path to happiness and true freedom, and I repeat to them with force and conviction: "If you hear the Lord's call, do not reject it! Dare to become part of the great movements of holiness which renowned saints have launched in their following of Christ. Cultivate the ideals proper to your age, but readily accept God's plan for you if he invites you to

seek holiness in the consecrated life" (*Vita Consecrata*, n. 106). For their part, may Dioceses never fail to call people to consecrated life!

I invite you *to keep a watchful gaze on and pay renewed attention to the young people who hope to enter the religious life*. Their ecclesial experience is often recent. It is therefore essential to give them a solid human, intellectual, moral, spiritual, community and pastoral training that will prepare them to dedicate themselves to God without reserve in the *following of Christ*. In this spirit, the inter-novitiates that have been set up allow for a greater number of young people in formation. This gives an obvious dynamism to their progress and helps them know and support one another in their choice of life. Many congregations have also welcomed young foreigners from Africa, Asia or Latin America. This is a visible sign of the universal character of the Church. But you are keenly aware of the difficulties that this can present, in particular, the possible attraction of Western life to the detriment of the local Church's mission. I cannot place too strong an emphasis on asking congregations to set up formation houses in the countries where vocations are most numerous, so as not to detach young people too suddenly from their own cultural milieu and with a view to training them for their specific mission in their own Country, which has a multitude of needs.

9. At the end of our meeting, dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood, I would like to encourage you to pursue with enthusiasm and zeal the passionate mission of guiding the people which the Lord has entrusted to you. More than ever, the Church needs authentic witnesses who show that the radical nature of the Gospel is a source of happiness and freedom.

Please take back to the priests, deacons and all the lay people of your Dioceses my affectionate thoughts and fervent prayer, telling them once again of my confidence and encouragement in their work at the service of the Church. I renew my cordial greetings to all consecrated persons - to the contemplatives, to the members of the congregations and religious institutes of apostolic life, of secular institutes, societies of apostolic life and of the new communities - as I tell them once again of my esteem for their indispensable witness of gratuitousness, brotherhood and hope which they offer not only to the Church but to all of society, remaining prophetic signs of the love of the Lord who wants to transform human hearts to make them conform every more closely with their vocation. I also assure my spiritual closeness to the elderly or sick Religious who, through their witness of holiness and prayer but also their experience and wisdom, play a large part in the missionary success of their institutes and of the entire Church. May Mary, who welcomed Christ in a response of love and total offering to the Father's will, support you in her motherly solicitude! My affectionate thoughts also go to all the people who in the past weeks have been affected by the serious flooding in the South of France. I ask you to assure them of my prayers and my spiritual closeness. To you all and to all the members of your Dioceses, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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