



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS ATTENDING A FORMATION COURSE
SPONSORED BY THE CONGREGATION FOR BISHOPS**

Thursday, 18 September 2003

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I greet each one of you with joy, new Bishops from various countries who have come for the traditional study convention sponsored by the Congregation for Bishops. I cordially thank you for this visit and express a grateful thought to Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, who has voiced your common sentiments.

At the beginning of your episcopal ministry, you wished to make a pilgrimage to the tomb of the Apostle Peter, to renew your profession of faith and reinforce your communion with the Successor of Peter.

In an atmosphere of brotherhood and prayer, you then wanted to examine the challenges that Pastors of the Church today can expect, so as to proclaim more effectively Christ's Gospel to the people of our time.

For my own part, I would like to assure you of my closeness and to encourage you to pursue your specific mission as Pastors with generosity and greatness of soul.

2. Dear Brothers, you know well that the Bishop's ministry is of prime importance to the life of the Church. Indeed, according to St Paul's words, the Church was built upon the foundation of the Apostles (cf. *Eph 2: 20*). And the Bishops, through the divine will, are successors of the Apostles and "shepherds of the Church, and that whoever hears them, hears Christ, while whoever rejects them, rejects Christ and him who sent Christ" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 20).

The pastoral mission entrusted to you is exalting, but today it is also particularly arduous and difficult. Indeed, our time, with its own specific problems, is marked by confusion and uncertainty. Many people, even Christians, seem bewildered and devoid of hope. In this context we Pastors are called to proclaim the Gospel and to be witnesses of hope, our gaze turned to the Cross, to the mystery of the triumph and fruitfulness of the crucified Christ. He, the living One, accompanies us on the paths of history with the power of his Spirit. This illuminating certainty must deeply inspire our pastoral outlook, confirming our faith in God and in men and increasing our apostolic daring.

The episcopal ministry, in the light of theological hope, was the theme of the last Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. After reflecting and praying over the conclusions of the Synod, I have compiled the customary Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation which I will present to the Church next 16 October, on the important date of the 25th anniversary of my Pontificate.

3. You still have vivid memories of your episcopal Ordination. On that day, through the sacramental act of the imposition of hands and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, the fullness of your ministerial priesthood was conferred upon you. The Bishop's life is the gift of himself to Christ and to the Church. Our ministry calls us to lead a holy life. Be the vivid and visible image of the Good Shepherd. Watch over your flock "as those who serve". Love the Church more than yourselves! Live in her and for her, expending yourselves in the pastoral service.

Our interior life must always flow into our apostolate. Of course, it must also be an active, intense undertaking that expresses pastoral charity. The source of pastoral charity is the contemplation of the face of Christ, the Good Shepherd. Be men of prayer! By your example, you will show the primacy of the spiritual life, that is, the primacy of grace, which is the core of every apostolate. Each Bishop must be able to say with St Paul: "For me to live is Christ" (Phil 1: 21).

4. Next, I would like to urge you to consider the well-being of your primary collaborators, the priests. Bishops, the Council recommends, should treat the priests with special love; they should show concern for their spiritual, intellectual and material conditions (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 28). It is certainly a blessing for a diocese when every member of its presbyterate can rejoice to have found in the Bishop his best friend and father.

At the beginning of the third millennium, the urgent need for a satisfactory vocations ministry is being felt more than ever.

Vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life are a gift of God that must be asked for with insistence in prayer (cf. Mt 9: 38). But they are also the fruit of strong and healthy families and of ecclesial communities in which the figure of the priest is duly esteemed and appreciated. The utmost care should be taken in choosing seminary educators, because only the personal witness of a generous and joyful life can attract the hearts of young people today. It is in these contexts

that youth will be able to hear and follow the voice of the Teacher, who invites them to follow him (cf. Mt 19: 21) and leads them to make the generous gift of self in the service of their brothers and sisters.

5. Dear Brothers, when you return to your dioceses after these days of study and intense communion, may you be comforted by the assurance that the Pope shares in your joys, your difficulties and your hopes.

I entrust to Mary, Mother of the Church, the mature resolutions that you have reached in these days, so that she may bring your every pastoral effort to fruition.

Upon each one of you, I warmly invoke a special blessing from the Lord, that I gladly extend to the communities entrusted to your pastoral care.