



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE Bishops' Conference of France
ON ITS 'Ad limina Apostolorum' VISIT**

25 January 1997

*Your Eminence,
Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. During your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles, I am pleased to welcome you, the Pastors of the 10 Dioceses of the Apostolic Region of South Western France. With you, I invoke Peter and Paul, the pillars of the Church. May the first of the Apostles and the Apostle to the nations grant you success in carrying out your pastoral ministry with the light and strength that the Spirit of the Lord gives!

I thank Cardinal Pierre Eyt, Archbishop of Bordeaux and president of your Apostolic Region, for his enlightening reflections on the Church's situation in your Dioceses. The difficulties and limitations you suffer were emphasized, but it is also possible to give thanks for the many expressions of real dynamism in your communities.

2. At this time, many Dioceses feel the need to reorganize and especially *to consolidate or revise their territorial structures*. Indeed, important changes have taken place and are recurring in the population and in economic activity. Life-styles are changing. One must also note that there is a greater mobility of people whose centres of interest and culture are evolving. The appearance of society is being markedly transformed.

For the Church, the most obvious facts are the decline in the number of priests and often in the number of her practising members. The causes of these disturbing developments are complex and it is impossible to ignore the influence of social changes on the practice of the faithful and

Christian communities long-established in these lands; indeed, institutional adjustments are far from being caused solely by fluctuations in the number of clergy. Established customs and habits abandoned today may be regretted by some, but it is not a question of cherishing nostalgic memories of a past which has sometimes been idealized, nor of blaming anyone. In your quinquennial reports your analyses show that you are aware of the situation and are working to build in these new conditions.

Changes are also occurring in a positive way in the attitude of Catholics. You have taken stock of the spiritual journeys, conversions, and involvement within the Church which express a deep qualitative renewal of Christian faith and action. We see a true source of hope in the willingness of a considerable number of lay people to play a more active and diversified role in ecclesial life, and to take the necessary steps to train seriously for this.

In this context, your essential mission as Pastors spurs you to reorganize your communities. You have shown that developments are guided by large-scale consultations which do not only consider the practical conditions of the consolidation of parishes or the creation of new pastoral units. Priests and faithful must create the conditions so that the Good News can be proclaimed and the People of God guided and assembled by Christ's sacramental presence. Diocesan Synods have often been the framework for a remarkable maturing of the baptized, revealing to them their inalienable responsibilities and complementarity in ecclesial life.

With regard to the current situations and renewed structures you are setting up, I would simply like to share a few reflections with you on the life of pastoral groups. My intention is to encourage you, with the clergy and faithful of the Dioceses in your country, to base the daily fulfilment of your common mission ever more firmly on the rock of Christ and on the communion of the whole Church.

3. In making the changes I have just mentioned, the vital forces in many of your Dioceses have clearly understood the importance of the *territorial structure of the Church*: in close co-ordination with the other pastoral groups, it is essentially the parish which gives the Church concrete life, so that she may be open to all. Whatever its size, it is not merely an association. It must be a home where the members of the Body of Christ gather together, open to meeting God the Father, full of love and Saviour in his Son, incorporated into the Church by the Holy Spirit at the time of their Baptism, and ready to accept their brothers and sisters with fraternal love, whatever their condition or origins.

The parish institution is meant to provide the Church's great services: prayer in common and the reading of God's Word, celebrations, especially that of the Eucharist, catechesis for children and the adult catechumenate, the ongoing formation of the faithful, communication designed to make the Christian message known, services of charity and solidarity and the local work of movements. In brief, in the image of the sanctuary which is its visible sign, it is a building to be erected

together, a body to bring to life and develop together, a community where God's gifts are received and where the baptized generously make their response of faith, hope and love to the call of the Gospel. At this time when pastoral structures are being renewed, it will be appropriate to resume the in-depth study of the ecclesiological teaching of the Second Vatican Council, in the Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium* and in the various documents providing directives, especially those concerning priests and the laity.

It seems to me that the main concern in this necessary reorganization is to allow the parish effectively to fulfil its functions which I have just recalled. It should therefore not be too small and, as far as possible, it should continue to be close to the practising faithful and all their brothers and sisters. Even when a new consolidation joins Church members from several localities, it is essential to make the greatest efforts to safeguard their historical, material and human patrimony, doing all you can to provide Christians with the spiritual help they need, and seeing that shrines remain places of habitual prayer and that popular devotional practices are not forgotten.

4. An essential question is obviously that of *leaders*. To guide and enliven pastoral units, *the collaboration of priests and lay persons* is increasingly necessary. Around the pastor, the pastoral councils, leadership teams and the pastoral rotas play an indispensable role. In particular, they allow the best structuring of the various levels of ecclesial life: the local community, sometimes small, but a living and active team, the parish itself, then the district or the larger pastoral region, and lastly, the whole Diocese. It is important to see that exchanges are fostered in both directions: that leaders hear the requests from the grassroots and that the instructions given by the leaders themselves, beginning with those of the Bishop, unite everyone.

All this presupposes that priests and lay people clearly *co-ordinate*, without confusion, *the concerns of the ministerial priesthood and of the universal priesthood* according to the Council's teaching in the Constitution on the Church, as I stressed in Reims (cf. *Address to pastoral workers in the cathedral*, n. 4, 22 September 1996; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 2 October 1996, p. 8). The lay faithful who carry out ecclesial duties know they do not replace the priest, but co-operate in a common task, which belongs to the whole Church.

One of the main concerns of pastors and of the faithful who have responsibilities is to promote *harmonious unity in the community*. This is an essential condition if the local Church is to be a transparent sign of Christ's presence in the eyes of the baptized who do not take part in her daily life and in society as a whole. Among Christians, there is an enormous diversity of social backgrounds, cultures, interests as well as charisms. The parishes' vocation is precisely to enable each individual to express himself and to be part of the unity of the body formed by different but complementary members. Let us not cease to meditate on St Paul's lessons in this regard (cf. 1 Cor 12).

In particular, the ecclesial community must continue to be a *meeting place for the generations*,

despite the gaps which are often observed. Without passively waiting, adults must keep in touch with young people, must be able to accept them, listen to their requests, understand their problems and their worries about the future, give them a place to which they are fully entitled, and a share in their responsibilities. Diocesan synods have often been concerned about this; it is right to do all we can to enable young people to continue their Christian formation among themselves as they often wish to do, but also to help them fit into the adult world to which they have a great deal to contribute. I will return to the pastoral care of youth, but at this point I am keen to stress that we should be careful not to isolate them from the whole context of pastoral life.

5. The ecclesial community's vitality emerges in its fidelity to the mission which the Lord entrusted to his disciples: *evangelization*. We are the guardians and messengers of the Good News. In all its forms the apostolate consists first of all in transmitting and preaching the word of salvation, and knowledge of the Word who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. God's Word alone can truly illumine each individual's path, give full meaning to family life, to professional activities and to the thousand tasks of social life, and open the way to hope.

The Word we acclaim in the liturgy and for which we glorify God is directly addressed to the faithful who are present. The *community* gathered together must itself be constantly evangelized: each believer always needs to let himself be challenged by Christ and to be converted by listening to the Word which makes great demands but at the same time is a priceless gift, for it is the proclamation of salvation, reconciliation and the victory of life over death.

The preparation of *children and young people* to accept the Word of life is a fundamental mission of evangelization for communities. "That ... which we have heard ... which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 Jn 1:1), we must proclaim from generation to generation. Awakening the faith in children, catechesis and Christian initiation must inspire the deepest devotion in those who dedicate themselves to this task and to acquiring skills without which the other parishioners might lose interest in what continues to be a mission for all.

Should Catholics not also be constantly challenged about what they do to present Christ's message to those *who only occasionally go* to church, to baptized persons who let the grace received in childhood remain buried? May they find at their side convinced and welcoming witnesses, respectful of each one's way but ready to account for the hope that is in them (cf. 1 Pt 3:15)! We are fortunate to believe, and must know how to share it.

If we are imbued with the grace of the faith enlivened by hope and inspired by charity, there is no happy or sad aspect of village or neighbourhood life which can fail to move us. Thus evangelization will take different forms in social solidarity, family life, work, neighbourly relations. An isolated witness has its limitations, but witnesses stimulated by the community will be better able to share the "hope [that] does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us"?(Rom 5:5).

Within the context of parishes or pastoral districts, as I briefly recalled, *movements and associations* of the faithful give the mission a valuable incentive, seeing to its good co-ordination and integration in the whole. They help develop the spiritual life, form youth, share apostolic concern in the different walks of life and see that the service of the most underprivileged is effective and constant (cf. *Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 24; Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, n. 30).

Invite people to pray for priestly vocations Today I would once again like to encourage the faithful of your Dioceses to renew their commitments to evangelization as individuals, in the family and in the groups which have been formed. They will be encouraged by the *Letter to the Catholics of France* recently adopted by your Episcopal Conference.

6. After dealing with the question of responsible community leadership by priests and lay people, and that of evangelization missions, it would now be appropriate briefly to recall the heart of ecclesial life: for the parish is the most important place for *the celebration of the sacraments*, and in particular, for the Eucharist, the source of sanctification for every state of life. A parish's vocation can be defined only according to the Church's sacramental structure. It is here that Christ's presence in the paschal mystery is visibly signified. At Mass, the offerings of all converge: of happiness and suffering, apostolic efforts and fraternal services of all kinds. The Lord associates the sacrifices of his brothers and sisters with his own sacrifice. He gathers us in his Holy Spirit, he strengthens our faith and our charity, he listens to our petitions to the Father to extend reconciliation, salvation and peace to the whole world and unites us with the saints of every age as we wait for full communion in his kingdom.

It is true that many of the faithful suffer from the fact that Mass can no longer be celebrated near their homes nor as often as formerly. Priests are less numerous and further away. For this reason it is all the more important that we give the Eucharist its full value. A community is impoverished if it does not fervently discover this vital link with the Lord, the source of all Christian life and every apostolate. The Eucharistic gathering is the place where this fundamental reality of the faith is tangibly recognized.

No effort should be spared to make available the principal gifts, which are the sacraments, at every stage of our life. Christian life begins with the sanctifying grace of Baptism; young people's entry into Christian maturity is strengthened by Confirmation; the constitution of the couple and foundation of a family are consecrated by participation in the covenant of Marriage; in facing evil and sin, the grace of forgiveness and reconciliation is granted and explicitly signified by the sacrament of Penance; suffering is linked to the Cross in the Anointing of the Sick. At the heart of the Christian communities' mission, preparation for the sacraments is obviously of primary importance.

Doubtless a keener awareness of the gifts bestowed upon his Church by the Lord will invite people to value vocations to the priestly ministry, so that God's word may be imparted, Christ be made

sacramentally present and the People of God be guided. May your pastoral communities never cease to beg the Lord to call young people to total consecration in order to serve him among their brothers and sisters!

7. It is true that the vastness of your mission may seem to exceed the possibilities of communities which know their limitations and their poverty. It is by faith that they must discover that they are created in the image of the Son of man and the little band of his disciples who had their weaknesses; nonetheless, they laid the foundations of the Church, which received the promise of fidelity from Christ the Good Shepherd.

Poverty of numbers, means and abilities must invite us to rely truly on the Lord. The Church knows she is vulnerable but signs of grace are apparent in the apostolic dynamism to which you witness and for which we must thank Christ who never abandons his flock but guides it by the Holy Spirit.

May your meeting with the Bishop of Rome strengthen you in your ministry! Please convey my affectionate greetings and encouragement to the diocesan priests, deacons, religious and lay people who are involved in pastoral councils, leadership teams or the pastoral rotas, to the sick and to all the faithful, that they may advance in their various missions as baptized persons in the organic unity of the Church, the Body of Christ.

I invoke Our Lady's motherly intercession and the grace of divine blessings on you and on all your diocesan communities.

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