



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE SPANISH BISHOPS
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Tuesday, 7 July 1998

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. It is a joy for me to have this meeting during your *ad limina* visit, when the Lord grants us an opportunity to live with renewed intensity, near the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, the experience of ecclesial communion in love and fidelity to the faith we have received, and thus to reinforce the commitment to evangelization and to enliven the ministry of continuing the mission Christ entrusted to the Apostles.

I cordially thank Archbishop Carlos Amigo Vallejo of Seville for his kind words expressing your common sentiments of affection and loyalty as Pastors who lead the People of God living in the East and South of the Spanish peninsula, as well as the Balearic and Canary Islands. I greet you all cordially, Archbishops of Seville, Valencia and Granada, Bishops of the respective suffragan Dioceses and the Auxiliaries. As Pastor of the whole Church I feel your closeness and union "in a bond of unity, charity and peace" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 22). I support you in your pastoral efforts as ministers of the Gospel (cf. *Lumen gentium*, nn. 24, 27) and I encourage you: "Do not be weary in well doing" (2 Thes 3:13).

2. The Gospel arrived in your lands at the dawn of Christianity, creating communities of faith which shared the Church's destiny during the various stages of her almost 2,000-year-old history. They felt the warmth of the apostolic tradition, joyfully welcoming its message of salvation; with their particular councils they contributed to articulating the faith and reinforcing a lifestyle consistent with the truth professed; they knew persecution and the anguish of doctrinal deviations; they were able to live quietly under the domination of other cultures and beliefs, and participated in re-establishing the faith which they had originally cherished in their hearts; they witnessed at close hand the Church's great reform movements and collaborated with intense missionary zeal in the evangelization of the New World; lastly, they have lived and are living at a fascinating time when the whole ecclesial community, under the impetus of the Second Vatican Council, feels deeply committed to living Christ's Gospel authentically and to proclaiming it in all its splendour to the men

and women of today.

The historical fortunes and misfortunes experienced by your peoples have forged their tradition and have created a rich heritage that can be displayed to the world in many works of art, culture and civilization. This inheritance has deep Christian roots. Its ancient tradition has been handed down to our day in literary works and in monuments which must not be forgotten and deserve to be studied and revered as a precious gift to your Churches and to your peoples.

You have also inherited abundant fruits of holiness which have appeared in the most disparate circumstances. Among them are many famous examples of dedication to the apostolic ministry which can inspire your daily tasks, such as Leander and Isidore; Peter Pascual, a martyred Bishop of Jaén, John of Ávila, patron of Spanish clergy, and the Hieronymite monk, Hernando de Talavera; the Augustinian, Thomas of Villanova, and the Sevillian, John de Ribera, Archbishops of Valencia and the founders of colleges for priestly formation. A few years ago, during my first visit to Spain, I myself had the opportunity in Seville to beatify Sr Angela of the Cross, who worthily continued the tradition of commitment and Christian love for the most needy in which John of God and John Grande had distinguished themselves centuries before.

3. On this occasion, I would like to reflect with you on some of the most important challenges you must face at this time, so that today your ecclesial communities, as they were in the past, may also be faithful to their “mission of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God” (*Lumen gentium*, n. 5) and of communicating Christ’s grace and truth to everyone. The events celebrated in the metropolitan sees of your Ecclesiastical Provinces during my above-mentioned visit to Spain have a certain symbolic significance, still valid today, whose interest extends beyond the localities where they occurred. In Valencia I ordained a large number of priests; in Granada I had a meeting with teachers of the faith and in Seville, as I have said, I beatified Sr Angela of the Cross, an example of Christian charity. These acts highlight the essential aspects which mark the Church of all times as a community which gathers around the living Christ and celebrates his presence, which proclaims the Gospel to all peoples and sows it in the inmost depths of their hearts, and which is distinguished by its resolute and unconditional love for their brothers and sisters (cf. Acts 2:42-45; Jn 13:35).

4. Liturgical reform has been one of the most visible fruits and has been welcomed with the greatest enthusiasm by the People of God. We should not only see it as a desire for change, which seems to be typical of our time, or a legitimate wish to adapt the celebration of the sacred mysteries to the sensitivities and culture of our day. In fact, behind this phenomenon lies the aspiration of believers to live and to express their deepest and most authentic identity as disciples gathered around Christ, present in their midst in a unique way through his Word and the sacraments, especially the Eucharist (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 7). In this way not only is the edifice of the faith built on firm and lasting foundations (cf. Lk 6:48), but all Christian communities become aware of their duty to celebrate the mystery of Christ, Saviour of the human race, to proclaim him and to make him openly known to the people of today. In doing so they must overcome the temptation they sometimes feel within and outside themselves to attribute other identities and interests to the Church. Indeed, the Church lives more on what she receives from her Lord than on what she can do with her own strength alone. In this respect we should also recognize with the Apostle: “I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Cor 12:9).

This is why, in an atmosphere which sometimes tends to trivialize the deepest convictions, it is particularly important to teach the faithful to feel an inner need to receive the sacraments frequently, to participate actively in the liturgical celebrations, and to gather on Sundays with their other brethren to celebrate the Passover of the Lord in the sacrament of the New Covenant. No one must lack the support of the whole Christian community. In this regard, it is useful to recall that it is the particular concern for Bishops to see “that the Lord’s day be properly recognized, honoured and celebrated by all the faithful as the true ‘day of the Lord’ on which the Church gathers together to renew the memory of the Lord’s paschal mystery, to listen to the word of God, to offer the sacrifice of the Lord, and also to sanctify the day with prayer, charity and abstention from work” (Sacred Congregation for Bishops, *Directory on the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops Ecclesiae imago*, 22 February 1973, n. 86).

5. I am pleased to note how, together with the other Bishops of Spain, you are seeking to shed the light of the Gospel on all human and social milieus, without excluding the moral and social dimensions. This aspect of your ministry, which you must always exercise fearlessly, although with great prudence and sensitivity, must reach peoples’ hearts, so that each believer can experience the transforming power of faith in his daily life, express it with authenticity and bear effective witness to it.

The Church, which has always considered the formation of the faithful as one of her most essential tasks, is also aware of its decisive importance at a time when circumstances are changing at a dizzy pace, posing new questions everyday which challenge the faith of believers. As I said in Granada, “an immature Christian and ecclesial group is unable to withstand the attacks of an increasingly secularized society” (cf. *Homily, Celebration of the Word with Teachers of the Faith*, Granada, 5 November 1982, n. 3).

As Pastors in a land that has given the Church and society distinguished figures in the field of education, you know well that in life, as in faith, one never stops learning. This is why it is constantly necessary to promote the Christian formation not only of children and young people, but also of adults and families, of the individual and of groups, according to their own charism and vocation, without forgetting the teachers and priests themselves, who are also pilgrims in this world and permanent disciples of the Lord.

You must take particular care of them, because they are your most immediate co-workers in the pastoral mission. They will frequently need you, especially during the first years of their ministry, not only as teachers and guides in caring for the People of God, but also as fathers in whom to confide their aspirations and problems, from whom they can receive understanding and encouragement for fulfilling their priestly ministry. In turn, they will learn from you how to be close to the needs and concerns of the faithful, to whom they must give themselves as true shepherds who know each of them by name (cf. Jn 10:3).

6. The creativity, refined sensitivity and rich expressive ability of your peoples are positive factors as you lead them to meet God, an unspeakable mystery which is frequently reached through images, gestures and symbols. I am well aware that this aspect of popular piety has an important place in your pastoral concern, and I encourage you to continue your efforts to ensure that, as in the divine pedagogy, words accompany actions, so that the presence and will of God are more and more clearly expressed (cf. *Dei Verbum*, n. 2).

In fact, it is important that religious expression enable people to acquire a deeper understanding of the faith and that it illumine all aspects of the life of believers, making them day by day more conscious that they must grow like living stones to be built into God's temple in this world (cf. 1 Pt 2:5). For this reason you must see that every ecclesial group, such as fraternities and confraternities, become centres for the Christian formation of their members and a way for them to be fully involved in the life of the ecclesial community by participating in the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, in union with their Pastors, collaborating with them within the framework of their common pastoral ministry and constantly promoting the commitment to charity and solidarity which is characteristic of a truly Christian and fraternal community. In fact, the Second Vatican Council recalled the objectives of Christian education: to ensure that every baptized person learns to worship God the Father in spirit and in truth, especially through the liturgy; that he lives as the new man in justice and holiness; that he contributes to the growth of the Mystical Body by bearing witness to the hope that is in him and promoting the most prized human and social values (cf. *Gravissimum educationis*, n. 2). In this way we can hope that the lay faithful, whose value and full dignity are recognized in the Church, will be more involved in the tasks proper to a Christian community which intensely lives the Gospel, proclaims it courageously and spreads its values in all areas of human life, both individual and social.

7. In their plans for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the Bishops of Spain have fully accepted the objective set for Christians throughout the world, which includes "solidarity with one's neighbour, especially the most needy" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 42). This is one of the Church's greatest concerns in our day and involves many of you in particular, since you have seen among your people the devastating effects of a conception of man "only as a producer and consumer of goods, or as an object of State administration" (*Centesimus annus*, n. 49). In addition to the difficult situation of men who work in the fields or at sea, there are others more recent and equally tragic in which the Church, like the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:29f.), encounters the unemployed, young people in despair, drifting between trivialities or ravaged by drugs, immigrants arriving from other lands, women disparaged, homeless children and men stripped of their dignity. Do not let any of your faithful or your communities be indifferent to these realities, which are always in need of attention despite all the declarations of a society that seems self-satisfied and proud of its achievements. It is essential to bear convincing witness to Christ who came "to preach the Good News to the poor ... [and] to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Lk 4:18-19), with words and deeds which leave nothing untried, from "emergency" charity in those cases where necessary, to reforms of a more institutional nature that create a social fabric of greater justice and solidarity.

At this time in history, when your Churches are called to be the threshold of a Europe where a new social and political scene is taking shape, you also have the great responsibility of being a welcoming gateway for other peoples and of giving an example of generosity, knowing how to share your bread in a fraternal way with those who come to your land in search of new hope.

8. I would like to end this fraternal conversation by asking you to convey my affectionate greetings to all the members of your particular Churches: to the priests, and the religious communities; to the catechists and Christians committed to the apostolate; to young people and their parents; to the elderly, to the sick and to all who are suffering. May God grant that your peoples' Christian roots will instil a living hope and new dynamism in everyone, which will help them overcome the difficulties of the present time and assure them of a future of increasing spiritual and human progress. Tell your priests, consecrated persons, the other pastoral workers and the seminarians that the Pope appreciates their work for the Lord

and the Gospel cause, and that he hopes and trusts in their fidelity.

I entrust you and your pastoral intentions to the Virgin Mary, our heavenly Mother, whom your peoples revere and invoke with such fervour, so that you may fulfil the task of a new evangelization which prepares hearts for the Lord's coming.

Together with these wishes, I accompany you with prayer and affectionately impart my Apostolic Blessing to you all.

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