



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE CHURCH IN THE STATES
OF TEXAS, OKLAHOMA AND ARKANSAS (U.S.A.)
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

27 June 1998

Dear Brother Bishops, I warmly welcome you, the Pastors of the Church in the States of Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas, on the occasion of your *ad Limina* visit. In my meetings so far this year with the United States Bishops, we have considered some principal aspects of the new evangelization called for by the Second Vatican Council, the great event of grace by which the Holy Spirit has prepared the Church to enter the Third Christian Millennium. One essential part of this task is the proclamation of moral truth and its application to the personal lives of Christians and to their involvement in the world. Therefore, I wish to reflect with you today on your Episcopal ministry as teachers of moral truth and witnesses to the moral law. In every age, men and women need to hear Christ the Good Shepherd calling them to faith and conversion of life (cf. Mk 1:15). As shepherds of souls, you must be Christ's voice today, encouraging your people to rediscover "the beauty of truth, the liberating force of God's love, and the value of unconditional fidelity to all the demands of the Lord's law, even in the most difficult situations" (*Veritatis Splendor*, 107). The question posed by the rich young man in the Gospel – "Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?" (Mt. 19:16) – is a perennial human question. It is asked in one form or another, explicitly or implicitly, by every human being in every culture and at every moment in the drama of history. Christ's answer to that question – to follow him in doing the will of his Father – is the key to the fullness of life which he promises. Obedience to God's commandments, far from alienating us from our humanity, is the pathway to genuine liberation and the source of true happiness. In this year of preparation for the Great Jubilee dedicated to the Holy Spirit, let us remember that our efforts to preach the Good News and teach the moral truth about the human person are sustained by the Spirit, who is the principal agent in the Church's mission (cf. *Evangelium Nuntiandi*, 64). It is the Holy Spirit who "brings about the flourishing of Christian moral life and the witness of holiness amid the great variety of vocations, gifts, responsibilities, conditions and life situations" (*Veritatis Splendor*, 108). In your Dioceses and parishes, I urge you to make a special effort this year to increase awareness of the powerful activity of the Spirit in the world, for it is through his grace that we experience a "radical personal and social renewal capable of ensuring justice, solidarity, honesty and openness" (*Veritatis Splendor*, 98).² Given the circumstances of contemporary culture, your Episcopal ministry is especially challenging, and the situation which you face as teachers of moral truth is complex. Your parishes are filled with Catholics eager to lead responsible lives as spouses, parents, citizens, workers,

and professionals. These men and women, whom you meet daily in the course of your pastoral mission, know that they should live morally upright lives, but often they find it difficult to explain exactly what this implies. This difficulty reflects another side of contemporary culture: the skepticism regarding the very existence of “moral truth” and an objective moral law. This attitude is quite prevalent in the cultural institutions that influence public opinion, and, it must be said, is commonplace in many of your country’s academic, political and legal structures. In this situation, those who try to live according to the moral law often feel pressured by forces which contradict the things they know in their hearts to be true. And those responsible for teaching moral truth may feel as if their task is virtually impossible, given the power of those external cultural pressures. There have been similar moments in the course of the Church’s two- thousand-year history. Yet today’s cultural crisis has distinctive characteristics that give your task as moral teachers a real urgency. This urgency touches both the transmission of the moral truth contained in the Gospel and the Magisterium of the Church, and the future of society as a free and democratic way of life. How should we define this crisis of moral culture? We can glimpse its first phase in what Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote in his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*: “In this century [conscience] has been superseded by a counterfeit, which the eighteen centuries prior to it never heard of, and could not have mistaken for it, if they had. It is the right of self- will”. What was true in Newman’s 19th century is even truer today. Culturally powerful forces insist that the rights of conscience are violated by the very idea that there exists a moral law inscribed in our humanity, which we can come to know by reflecting on our nature and our actions, and which lays certain obligations upon us because we recognize them as universally true and binding. This, it is frequently said, is an abrogation of freedom. But what is the concept of “freedom” at work here? Is freedom merely an assertion of my will — “I should be permitted to do this because I choose to do it”? Or is freedom the right to do what I ought to do, to adhere freely to what is good and true (cf. *Homily at Baltimore*, October 8, 1995)? The notion of freedom as personal autonomy is superficially attractive; endorsed by intellectuals, the media, legislatures, and the courts, it becomes a powerful cultural force. Yet it ultimately destroys the personal good of individuals and the common good of society. Freedom-as-autonomy, by its single-minded focus on the autonomous will of the individual as the sole organizing principle of public life, dissolves the bonds of obligation between men and women, parents and children, the strong and the weak, majorities and minorities. The result is the breakdown of civil society, and a public life in which the only actors of consequence are the autonomous individual and the state. This, as the twentieth century ought to have taught us, is a sure prescription for tyranny.³ At its roots, the contemporary crisis of moral culture is a crisis of understanding of the nature of the human person. As pastors and teachers of the Church of Christ, you remind people that the greatness of human beings is founded precisely in their being creatures of a loving God, who gave them the capacity to know the good and to choose it, and who sent his Son to be the final and unsurpassable witness to the truth about the human condition: “In Christ and through Christ, God has revealed himself fully to mankind and has definitively drawn close to it; at the same time, in Christ and through Christ man has acquired full awareness of his dignity, of the heights to which he is raised, of the surpassing worth of his own humanity, and of the meaning of his existence” (*Redemptor Hominis*, 11). In Christ, we know that “the good of the person lies in being in the Truth and doing the Truth” (*Address to the International Congress of Moral Theology*, April 10, 1986, No. 1). In this Christian anthropology, the nobility of men and women lies, not simply in the capacity to *choose*, but in the capacity to choose wisely and to live according to that choice of what is good. In all of visible creation, only the human person chooses reflectively. Only the human person can discern between good and evil, and give reasons justifying that discernment. Only human beings can make sacrifices for what is good and true. That is why, throughout Christian history, the martyr remains the paradigm of discipleship: for the martyr lives out the relationship between truth, freedom, and goodness in the most radical way. By teaching the moral truth about the human person and witnessing to the moral law inscribed on the human heart, the Bishops of the Church are defending and promoting not

arbitrary claims made by the Church but essential truths, and therefore the good of individuals and the common good of society.⁴ If the dignity of the human person as a moral agent rests on the capacity to know and choose what is truly good, then the question of conscience comes into clearer focus. Respect for the rights of conscience is deeply ingrained in your national culture, which was formed in part by emigrants who came to the New World to vindicate their religious and moral convictions in the face of persecution. American society's historic admiration for men and women of conscience is the ground on which you can teach the truth about conscience today. The Church honors conscience as the "sanctuary" of the human person: here, men and women are "alone with God," whose voice echoes in the depths of their hearts, summoning them to love good and avoid evil (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 16). Conscience is that inner place where "man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience" (*ibid.*). This being the case, the dignity of conscience is demeaned when it is suggested, as the defenders of radical individual autonomy claim, that conscience is a wholly independent, exclusively personal capacity to determine what constitutes good and evil (cf. *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 43). Everyone must act in accordance with conscience. But conscience is neither absolutely independent nor infallible in its judgments; if it were, conscience would be reduced to the mere assertion of personal will. Thus it is precisely a defence of the dignity of conscience and of the human person to teach that consciences must be formed, so that they can discern what actually does or does not correspond to the "eternal, objective and universal divine law" which human intelligence is capable of discovering in the order of being (cf. *Dignitatis Humanae*, 3; *Veritatis Splendor*, 60). Because of the nature of conscience, the admonition always to follow it must immediately be followed by the question of whether what our conscience is telling us is true or not. If we fail to make this necessary clarification, conscience – instead of being that holy place where God reveals to us our true good – becomes a force which is destructive of our true humanity and of all our relationships (cf. *General Audience*, August 17, 1983, No. 3). As Bishops you have to teach that freedom of conscience is never freedom *from* the truth but always and only freedom *in* the truth. This understanding of conscience and its relationship to freedom should clarify certain aspects of the question of dissent from Church teaching. By the will of Christ himself and the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit, the Church is preserved in the truth and "it is her duty to give utterance to, and authoritatively to teach, that truth which is Christ himself, and to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order which have their origin in human nature itself" (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 14). When the Church teaches, for example, that abortion, sterilization or euthanasia are always morally inadmissible, she is giving expression to the universal moral law inscribed on the human heart, and is therefore teaching something which is binding on everyone's conscience. Her absolute prohibition that such procedures be carried out in Catholic health care facilities is simply an act of fidelity to God's law. As Bishops you must remind everyone involved – hospital administrations and medical personnel – that any failure to comply with this prohibition is both a grievous sin and a source of scandal (For sterilizations cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Quaecumque sterilizatio*, March 13, 1975, AAS [1976] 738-740). This and other such instances are not, it must be emphasized, the imposition of an external set of criteria in violation of human freedom. Rather, the Church's teaching of moral truth "brings to light the truths which [conscience] ought already to possess" (*Veritatis Splendor*, 64), and it is these truths which make us free in the deepest meaning of human freedom and give our humanity its genuine nobility. Almost two thousand years ago, Saint Paul urged us "not be conformed to this world" but to live the true freedom that is obedience to the will of God (Rom 12:2). In teaching the truth about conscience and its intrinsic relationship to moral truth, you will be challenging one of the great forces in the modern world. But at the same time, you will be doing the modern world a great service, for you will be reminding it of the only foundation capable of sustaining a culture of freedom: what the Founders of your nation called "self-evident" truths.⁵ From this perspective, it should be clear that the Church addresses issues of public life not for political reasons but as a servant of the truth about the human person, a defender of human dignity and a promoter of

human freedom. A society or culture which wishes to survive cannot declare the spiritual dimension of the human person to be irrelevant to public life. Cultures develop as ways of dealing with the most profound experiences of human existence: love, birth, friendship, work, death. Each of these experiences raises, in its unique way, the question of God: "at the heart of every culture lies the attitude man takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God" (*Centesimus Annus*, 24). American Catholics, in common with other Christians and all believers, have a responsibility to ensure that the mystery of God and the truth about humanity that is revealed in the mystery of God are not banished from public life. This is especially important for democratic societies, since one of the truths contained in the mystery of our creation by God is that the human person must be "the origin, the subject and the purpose of all social institutions" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 25). Our intrinsic dignity and inalienable fundamental rights are not the result of social convention: they precede all social conventions and provide the norms that determine their validity. The history of the twentieth century is a grim warning of the evils that result when human beings are reduced to the status of objects to be manipulated by the powerful for selfish gain or for ideological reasons. In proclaiming the truth that God has given men and women an inestimable dignity and inalienable rights from the moment of conception, you are helping to rebuild the moral foundations of a genuine culture of freedom, capable of sustaining institutions of self-governance that serve the common good.⁶ It is a tribute to the Church and to the openness of American society that so many Catholics in the United States are involved in political life. As pastors and teachers, your responsibility to Catholic public officials is to remind them of the heritage of reflection on the moral law, on society, on democracy, which they ought to bring to their office. Your country prides itself on being a realized democracy, but democracy is itself a moral adventure, a continuing test of a people's capacity to govern themselves in ways that serve the common good and the good of individual citizens. The survival of a particular democracy depends not only on its institutions, but to an even greater extent on the spirit which inspires and permeates its procedures for legislating, administering, and judging. The future of democracy in fact depends on a culture capable of forming men and women who are prepared to defend certain truths and values. It is imperilled when politics and law are sundered from any connection to the moral law written on the human heart. If there is no objective standard to help adjudicate between different conceptions of the personal and common good, then democratic politics is reduced to a raw contest for power. If constitutional and statutory law are not held accountable to the objective moral law, the first casualties are justice and equity, for they become matters of personal opinion. Catholics in public life render a particularly important service to society when they defend objective moral norms as "the unshakable foundation and solid guarantee of a just and peaceful human coexistence, and hence of genuine democracy", for it is through our common obligation to these moral norms that we come to know, and can defend, the equality of all citizens, "who possess common rights and duties" (*Veritatis Splendor*, 96). A climate of moral relativism is incompatible with democracy. That kind of culture cannot answer questions fundamental to a democratic political community: "Why should I regard my fellow citizen as my equal?"; "Why should I defend someone else's rights?"; "Why should I work for the common good?" If moral truths cannot be publicly acknowledged as such, democracy is impossible (cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, 101). Thus I wish to encourage you to continue to speak out clearly and effectively about the fundamental moral questions facing people today. The interest with which many of your documents have been received throughout society is an indication that you are providing much needed guidance when you remind everyone, and especially Catholic citizens and Catholic political leaders, of the essential bond between freedom and truth.⁷ Dear Brother Bishops, a time of "crisis" is a time of opportunity as well as a time of danger. That is certainly true of the crisis of moral culture in the developed world today. The call of the Second Vatican Council to the People of God to witness to the truth about the human person amidst the joy and hope, grief and pain of the contemporary world is a call to all of us for a personal commitment to effective episcopal leadership in the new evangelization. By focusing the attention of the faithful and all your fellow citizens on the extremely serious moral choices

before them, you will help to bring about that renewal of moral goodness, solidarity and genuine freedom which the United States and the world urgently need. Entrusting your ministry, and the priests, religious, and laity of your Dioceses to the protection of Mary, Patroness of the United States under the great title of her Immaculate Conception, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing. © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

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