



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Monday, 14 September

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. Welcome to Peter's house! I would like to repeat to you the words the Lord Jesus addressed to the Twelve when he gathered them round on their return from a mission: "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while" (Mk 6:31).

Today's meeting extends the short but very significant series of my meetings with the Pastors of the Church in the Czech Republic after the political changes of 1989. My journey of 1990 there remains unforgettable, as does the historic *ad limina* visit made two years ago by all the Bishops of the Czech and Slovak Episcopal Conferences, which were then still united. After the division of Czechoslovakia, I have visited your country twice.

My visit in 1995 has left lasting impressions in my mind. I had the joy of enrolling among the saints Jan Sarkander and Zdislava of Lemberk, two distinguished figures who honour the age-old history of your Church and have been added to the numerous ranks of chosen souls who have flourished down the centuries in the lands of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia.

These observations and remarks are a continuation of the more general and detailed ones I made to your Episcopal Conference during my visit last year for the millennium of St Adalbert.

2. I am pleased to see this *ad limina* visit in the special light which shines from these courageous witnesses to the Gospel. Sts Adalbert and Jan Sarkander show the way *to profess and bear witness to the faith* to the point of bloodshed, in response to the various trials which the ecclesial community is called to face in changing situations. And St Zdislava points to *the family as the Church's privileged way* to renew individuals and society with the leaven of the Gospel.

In fact, commitment to the faith and the family apostolate give fundamental direction to the Church's action: faith recalls the vertical axis, so to speak, the priority task to proclaim God and lead people to him; the family is more representative of the horizontal dimension, the social fabric to be enlivened with Christian values.

On every continent and in every country this is the twofold commitment which pastoral activity must fulfil. In particular, in a situation like yours, marked on the one hand by the region's rich spiritual tradition and, on the other, by the wounds of dechristianisation and the challenges of the new sociocultural phase, the objectives of faith and the family stand out in all their urgency.

May I draw your attention to two phenomena which for some time now have been a subject of special concern to the Pastors of the Church in every part of the world, and in which you are also directly involved, as well I know: I am referring to the *new evangelization*, today opposed by the *spread of sects*, and to the *problems connected with family morality and respect for life*. Now you know well that these phenomena require particular study and targeted responses: they cannot be addressed with short-range solutions. Specific interventions are necessary, which must be part of an overall pastoral plan that aims to strengthen the basic convictions on which the private and public behaviour of the faithful depends.

3. First of all, as for faith, a serious effort must be made to strengthen the foundations of Christian life, since your Dioceses are equipped with generally effective structures, of which they can be justly proud. However, such a wealth of individuals and means needs to be replenished and constantly kept up-to-date, so that it will continue to be effective in its task of transmitting the message to the people of our time. This was the spirit that motivated you throughout the decade of preparation for the millennium of St Adalbert's martyrdom: a period of spiritual renewal promoted by the late and revered Cardinal František Tomášek and it will not fail to bear its fruits far beyond the threshold of the third millennium.

In this perspective, I encourage you first of all to advance the *liturgical and catechetical apostolate*, which is well rooted and developed in your parishes, as are the many forms of *charitable work* which bear valuable fruits of witness in everyday life, yet display continual imagination in emergencies, as happened during the floods last year and again recently. In this regard, I would like to add a word of praise to what the faithful in your Dioceses, parishes, associations, and in particular the *Charita* institutions throughout the republic have accomplished in Moravia and are accomplishing this year in eastern Bohemia, by organizing an extensive inter-linking network, together with general projects and concrete interventions. They were not intimidated by the immense problems posed by the destructive fury of the waters and gave a magnificent sign of active solidarity. Convey the Pope's concern and satisfaction to your volunteer workers who gave their help so effectively and modestly, without asking for any reward and with admirable altruism.

4. The Church today must face the challenge of secularism, which demands renewed zeal for deeper spirituality and missionary commitment. This is urgently necessary for the *new evangelization*, which involves the whole Christian community.

For this reason I urge each one of you to foster a close and cordial unity with your respective *diocesan presbyterates*, so that the lines of action worked out by the Bishop may be shared in theory and in practice, and pastoral dynamism may develop all its effectiveness.

At the same time, and precisely through the formative work conducted by the priests, it is necessary to nurture the spirituality and co-responsibility of *the laity*, according to the guidelines of the Second Vatican Council. To achieve this goal, the work of the *associations* and *movements* is very valuable, on condition that they act in constant harmony with the Pastors and do not turn in on themselves, so that the various charisms may effectively contribute to building up the entire ecclesial community.

To this end, effective pastoral involvement in culture and *social communications* is indispensable: I am pleased with the liveliness your Dioceses are also showing in this area. It is up to you above all to encourage such attention and to watch over the quality of the content. In this creative field it will be particularly interesting and useful to compare and exchange experiences with other European countries, in a constructive dialogue which will prove advantageous to everyone.

5. Another important field of action is *the pastoral care of the family*: it must be stressed as a priority need requiring attention. Without serious, thorough-going work with families, the pastoral care of vocations and young people in the broad sense inevitably becomes weaker in the present cultural context. As you have experienced, the families of the faithful have been the bulwark of faith in the dark periods of persecution, and vocations are naturally born in those environments where the faith is lived and tried like gold in a crucible. I therefore express my appreciation of the many initiatives on behalf of the family, on which, indeed, the preparation of favourable ground for the education of the young and for vocations depends. A good formation network at the service of families, which starts at the parish level, is assisted by movements and associations and seeks to involve families themselves by being a discreet but effective presence wherever people live and suffer, also seems the most effective answer to the proselytism of the sects and to the hedonistic and permissive mentality that undermines the fruitfulness of Christian life.

Commitment to the establishment, defence and growth of *Catholic schools* should also be seen as an indispensable service to families. They also make a precious contribution to the culture of the nation itself, as experience widely confirms. I therefore urge you to support them, while at the same time promoting the teaching of religion in State schools, because this corresponds to a fundamental right of young people and their parents.

In this regard, I also express my appreciation of your dedication to ensuring that *relations with the civil authorities* are always marked by honesty and co-operation. This will make it possible to deal more successfully with the various unsolved problems, to which finding a solution is in the interest of both Church and State.

6. Dear Brothers, I would now like to address you more directly, with a personal word of gratitude and appreciation for your generous pastoral work and especially to tell you: take heart, the Lord is with you! The more you feel the strain, the greater your personal difficulties or those caused by your surroundings, precisely then you will be able to count on the special presence of Christ the Good Shepherd, who calls you to be conformed more closely to him in faith and the grace of your state.

Be close to the priests who Providence continues to raise up among your people. Know how to listen to, to support, to appreciate, to direct and to admonish them when necessary, but always with wisdom and above all with paternal love. Teach them discernment, so that in turn they too will be able to teach the communities entrusted to them to discern and pursue what the Spirit suggests to nourish their faith and maintain the spiritual fervour which has distinguished Czech

families, especially in the period of atheistic oppression.

May the Church, which bears witness to her faith in Christ in your land, experience a flourishing of charisms and initiatives which, thanks to your ministry as Pastors, will bear abundant fruits of Christian life on the threshold of the third millennium.

With these wishes I entrust you to the Virgin Mary, who is venerated with such devotion in countless shrines throughout the republic. May she obtain for you the graces you most desire and always sustain you in your service to the Church. May my Blessing also accompany you, which I cordially impart to each of you and to your diocesan communities.

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