



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF COLOMBIA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Thursday, 30 September 2004

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I am pleased to receive you at this meeting which, at the end of your *ad limina* visit, enables me to greet you and to encourage you in hope, so necessary for the ministry that you generously carry out in your respective Archdioceses and Dioceses in the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Bogotá, Bucaramanga, Ibagué, Nueva Pamplona, Tunja and the recently erected Province of Villavicencio.

With the pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, you have had the opportunity to strengthen the bonds that unite your tasks today with the mission that Christ entrusted to the Twelve and to find inspiration in his example of self-denial and constant devotion to the evangelization of all peoples. At this meeting and at others with the various offices of the Roman Curia, communion with the See of Peter and the concern that all Bishops must have for the universal Church becomes obvious and effective (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 23).

I am grateful to Cardinal Pedro Rubiano Sáenz for his words on behalf of all of you, expressing your attachment and sincere affection. In this way you also reflect on the profound religious spirit of the Colombian People and the great appreciation of your communities for the Pope. Take them my greeting and remind them that I keep them very present in my prayers, especially at this difficult time for the Nation.

2. In your ministry to carry out the work of evangelization, you rely on such essential factors as the growing number of vocations to the priesthood and Religious life, the ample presence of religious institutes that enrich the particular Churches as well as the existence of many study and formation centres. All this shows how deeply rooted in the Country are the Christian faith and the dynamism

of the apostolic commitment of both individual members of the faithful and the ecclesiastical institutions. At the same time, it represents a valuable heritage to help all the baptized fulfil their ultimate true vocation: holiness (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 39).

In fact, holiness is the goal and the basic programme of all pastoral action. "It would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 31). For these very reasons, the visit of the relics of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus to Colombia is an opportunity to become aware that we are all called to holiness, a fundamental objective of the Church's mission.

3. In analyzing the situation of the Church and of Colombian society, you noted the increase in the truly disturbing phenomenon of moral deterioration. It appears in many different forms and affects the most varied contexts of personal, family and social life, undermining the intrinsic importance of moral rectitude and seriously threatening the very authenticity of the faith, which "gives rise to and calls for a consistent life commitment; it entails and brings to perfection the acceptance and observance of God's commandments" (*Veritatis Splendor*, n. 89).

It is a phenomenon that is partly due to ideologies that prevent the human being from clearly recognizing good in order to put it into practice. More often, however, it is a matter of a blurred conscience or one that deceitfully seeks to justify the person's conduct aided by an atmosphere that dazzlingly displays false values which tend to mask or denigrate the supreme good to which individuals aspire in the depth of their hearts.

Moreover, it is a very significant challenge that entails various types of pastoral action modelled on Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who came precisely to call sinners (cf. Mt 9: 13), coming close to many of them and urging them to change their way of life (cf. Lk 19: 8).

4. Jesus' mercy and compassion for human frailty did not prevent him from clearly pointing out what conduct to follow or which activities are most in tune with the divine will, and he often demolished the subtle arguments of his adversaries; this earned him the admiration of the people, "for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes" (Mt 7: 29). Nor did the Lord shrink from denouncing hypocrisy or abuse. Following his teachings, the Apostles never ceased in their preaching to insist on the ethical demands of those called to live "in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4: 24).

As his successors, it is the duty of Bishops to teach "that worldly things and human institutions are ordered, according to the plan of God the Creator, towards the salvation of men" (*Christus Dominus*, n. 12). Proclaiming justice, truth, fidelity and love of neighbour with all their concrete implications is inherent in proclaiming the Gospel in its integrity. This proclamation contributes to the formation of an upright conscience and enlightens all people of good will: thus, "they will listen, and every one turn from his evil way" (Jer 26: 3).

This teaching, integral and in perfect harmony with the moral doctrine of the Church, will be far more fruitful if it is combined with personal example, constant guidance and tireless encouragement.

Indeed, "the Bishop is the first preacher of the Gospel by his words and by the witness of his life" (*Pastores Gregis*, n. 26). This is especially important at this period of history in which, on the one hand, will power is being immobilized by the temptation to an easy life and on the other hand, the insistence on rights is misleading, deferring the need to assume personal duties and responsibilities. Pastors, consecrated persons, catechists and other evangelizing workers can do much through their own joyful witness of an irreproachable life, bringing the true human values into the limelight.

In this way, they show on the one hand that fullness of life in accordance with the Gospel criteria lies in being and not in having; moreover, assuming our obligations, even if this may at times cost us dearly, is an indispensable prerequisite for affirming the true dignity of the person which, in turn, brings inner peace that is the product of doing our duty and expending ourselves for a just cause.

This peace is also extended to the social surroundings and especially to the institutions when, based on an authentic spirit of service to the common good, they are governed by the criteria of equality, justice, honour and truth.

5. You recently reflected on Christian initiation as one of the key points of evangelization. This is a subject both crucial and thrilling, since it directly responds to Christ's mandate: "Make disciples of all nations... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28: 19-20). It is a matter of cultivating faith that germinates and like new shoots grows and brings forth new life to the Church of God. Starting out in the faith is also a magnificent opportunity for both Pastors and communities to relive the saving mystery of God from its very beginnings: the undeserved gift of sanctifying grace that unites us most deeply with Christ; the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that transforms and enlivens, endowing human life with continuous growth as a new creature; incorporation in the Church to be with her a sprouting seed and the beginning of the Kingdom of God on earth (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 5). All this places before our eyes our sublime origin as Christians, and the lofty vocation to which we are called.

At the various stages of Christian initiation where the mysteries of salvation are taught, there is also a visible need to examine them more deeply every day, taking nothing as normal or for granted, continuously discovering their greatness and keeping alive a sense of wonder before the sublime.

This will be a great help to you, not only in increasing your own faith and consolidating your baptismal commitment, but also in acquiring an awareness of the great responsibility that derives from it regarding catechumens and neophytes. Their future as disciples of Jesus will be largely

shaped by the example of their formation teachers, as well as by the ability to inculcate in their hearts a living, solid and complete faith.

The need for an organized Christian initiation, adapted to the cultural conditions of our time and of every place, and directed by well-qualified Pastors and catechists, becomes a priority especially where the social environment is unfavourable to the growth of the faith or where channels for its transmission and development are lacking, such as the family, school or even the Christian community. At times it can be useful to be inspired by the discipline of the early centuries, when, in addition to ascertaining the good intention of candidates, they are also carefully instructed in Christ's message and in proper Christian behaviour, and examined later to see "whether they have lived their catechumenate correctly, honoured widows, visited the sick and done good works" (*Traditio Apostolica*, n. 20).

6. At the end of this Meeting, I would like to bolster your hope, so necessary when facing the difficult situation that Colombia is currently going through, when we are continually receiving news of attacks on the life, freedom and dignity of people as if the human being were a commodity of little worth.

Furthermore, the frequency of kidnapping is notorious. It is a scourge to which thousands of families are exposed, which shows once again the depths of perversion to which human baseness can sink; with evil intent, every moral perspective is lost and the most fundamental human rights are neither recognized nor respected. In Colombia, many of these evils originate in the drug trade that has repercussions in numerous areas. It has afflicted the Nation for years, with incalculable negative consequences in social milieus.

I share your anxiety in facing this situation, and I appreciate your constant endeavours to avert violence, to eliminate its causes and to lessen its effects, paying proper attention to the victims and tirelessly encouraging those who are motivated to abandon the language of weapons and start out on the path of peaceful dialogue.

Dear Brother Bishops, please convey my encouragement and cordial greeting to your particular Churches, especially to your priests, religious communities, catechists and other people dedicated to the exciting task of being messengers of Christ's light and keeping it alive in the People of God.

As I invoke the protection of Our Lady of Chiquinquirá on your apostolic tasks, as well as on all the beloved Colombians, I impart my Apostolic Blessing to you with affection.