



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS
TO BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF THE NETHERLANDS
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Monday, 2 December 2013

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

In these days when you are making your visit *ad limina Apostolorum*, I greet each of you with affection in the Lord and I assure you of my prayers that this pilgrimage may be rich in grace and fruitful for the Church in the Netherlands. Thank you, dear Cardinal Willem Jacobus Eijk, for the words which you addressed to me on behalf of all!

Allow me first of all to express my gratitude for the service to Christ and to the Gospel which you render to the people entrusted to you, amid oftentimes difficult circumstances. It is not easy to maintain hope amid the challenges you face. The collegial exercise of your episcopal ministry, in communion with the Bishop of Rome, is necessary in order for this hope to grow, in a true dialogue and effective collaboration. You will do well to look with confidence to the signs of vitality that are manifest in the Christian communities of your dioceses. They are signs of the active presence of the Lord in the midst of the men and women in your country who expect authentic witnesses of the hope that enlivens us, that which comes from Christ.

With maternal patience the Church continues in her efforts to respond to the restlessness of so many men and women who experience anxiety and discouragement as they face the future. With your priests, who are your direct collaborators, you wish to be close to people who suffer from spiritual emptiness, and who are searching for meaning in life, even if they are not always able to voice it. How best to accompany them fraternally in this search if not by listening to them in order to share the hope, the joy and the ability to go ahead that Jesus Christ gives us?

For this reason, the Church seeks to propose the faith in an authentic, understandable and

pastoral manner. The Year of Faith was a felicitous opportunity to show how the content of the faith can reach each person. Christian anthropology and the social doctrine of the Church belong to the heritage of experience and of humanism on which European civilization is based and they can help concretely to reaffirm the primacy of man over technology and structures. This primacy of man presupposes an openness to transcendence. On the contrary, by suppressing the transcendent dimension, a culture is impoverished, while instead it should show the ability to connect faith and reason, truth and freedom, in constant harmony. Thus, the Church does not only propose unchanging moral truths and counter cultural attitudes, she proposes them as the key to human good and social development. Christians have a special mission to accept this challenge. The formation of consciences therefore becomes a priority, especially through the formation of critical judgment, while maintaining a positive approach toward social realities; thus it will be possible to avoid making superficial judgements and becoming resigned to indifference. Hence, this requires that Catholics, priests, consecrated persons and laity acquire a sound, quality education. I strongly encourage you to combine your efforts in order to respond to this need so as to proclaim the Gospel more effectively. In this context, the witness and commitment of the laity in the Church and society have an important role and should be strongly supported. All baptized Christians are invited to be disciples and missionaries, right where we are!

In your society, which is deeply marked by secularization, I encourage you also to be present in the public debate, in all the areas where man is at issue, to make God's mercy and his tenderness for every creature visible. In today's world, the Church has the task of untiringly repeating Jesus' words: "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). But let us ask ourselves: do those who meet us, who meet a Christian, perceive something of the goodness of God, of the joy of having encountered Christ? As I have often stated from first hand experience in the episcopal ministry, the Church does not spread through proselytism but by attraction. She is sent everywhere in order to awaken, to reawaken and to preserve hope! Hence the importance of encouraging your faithful to welcome occasions of dialogue, by being active wherever the future is decided; in this way they will be able to contribute to the debate on the great social issues like the family, marriage and the end of life.

Today more than ever we feel the need to take the way of ecumenism by inviting others to a true dialogue that looks for elements of truth and goodness and that offers answers inspired by the Gospel. The Holy Spirit urges us to come out of ourselves to meet others!

In a country which is wealthy in many respects, poverty is affecting a growing number of people. Make the most of the generosity of your faithful in order to bring the light and compassion of Christ to the places that await him and especially to the most marginalized! Furthermore, by giving youth a sound education, Catholic schools will continue to nourish their human and spiritual formation, in a spirit of dialogue and fraternity with those who do not share their faith. It is important, then, that young Christians receive a high quality catechesis that supports their faith and leads them to an encounter with Christ. A good formation and a spirit of openness! This is how the Good News

continues to be spread.

You are well aware that the future and the vitality of the Church in the Netherlands depends also on priestly and religious vocations! It is urgent that you create a vigorous and attractive vocations apostolate, and a common search for how best to sustain seminarians as they mature humanly and spiritually; so that they might live in a personal relationship with the Lord that will be the foundation of their priestly lives! May we also feel the urgency of praying to the Lord of the harvest! The rediscovery of prayer in various forms, and particularly Eucharistic Adoration, is a source of hope for the Church to grow and take root. How important and essential it is to be close to your priests, to be available to each of your priests in order to support and guide them should they need it! As a father, find the needed time to welcome them and to listen to them, every time they ask you. And also do not forget to go out to meet those who do not draw near; some of them have unfortunately failed in their commitments. In a very special way, I wish to express my compassion and to give the assurance of my prayer to each person who has been a victim of sexual abuse, and to their families; I ask you to continue to support them along the painful path of healing which they have undertaken with courage. Ready to respond to the desire of Christ, the Good Shepherd, have at heart to defend and foster unity in all things and among everyone.

To conclude I would like once again to give thanks with you for the signs of vitality with which the Lord has blessed the Church in the Netherlands, in this context that is not always easy. May he encourage you and confirm you in the delicate mission of guiding your communities on the journey of faith and unity, of truth and charity. As I entrust you, as well as the priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful of your dioceses to the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, I cordially impart to you the Apostolic Blessing, as a pledge of peace and spiritual joy; and fraternally I ask you not to forget to pray for me!