



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II

TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE SEMINAR

ON ECCLESIAL MOVEMENTS AND NEW COMMUNITIES *Your Eminences,*

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate!*¹. You have come to Rome from countries on every continent to reflect together on your concern as Pastors for ecclesial movements and new communities. It is the first time that the Pontifical Council for the Laity, in collaboration with the Congregations for the Doctrine of the Faith and for Bishops, has assembled such a large and distinguished group of Bishops to examine together ecclesial realities which I have not hesitated to describe as "providential" (cf. *Address at the Meeting with Ecclesial Movements and New Communities*, 30 May 1998, n. 7; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 3 June 1998, p. 2), because of their encouraging contributions to the life of God's People. Thank you for coming and for your commitment to this important pastoral field. I also express to the organizers, the Pontifical Council for the Laity, the Congregations for the Doctrine of the Faith and for Bishops, my great satisfaction with this initiative which will certainly benefit the Church's mission in the contemporary world. The seminar, which has occupied you these days, happily belongs to an apostolic project very dear to me, which stems from my meeting with the members of over 50 of these movements and communities in St Peter's Square on 30 May last year. I am certain that the results of your reflection will make themselves felt, thus helping that project and meeting to yield even more abundant fruits for the good of the whole Church.² The Council's Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops expresses the very heart of the episcopal ministry in these words: "When they exercise their teaching role, Bishops should proclaim the Gospel of Christ to people. This is one of the principal duties of Bishops. Fortified by the Spirit they should call on men and women to believe or should strengthen them when they already have a living faith. They should expound to them the whole mystery of Christ, that is, all those truths ignorance of which means ignorance of Christ" (*Christus Dominus*, n. 12). Every Pastor's concern to reach people and to speak to their hearts, their minds, their freedom and their thirst for happiness is born of Christ's own concern for man, his compassion for those whom he compares to a flock without a shepherd (cf. Mk 6:34 and Mt 9:36), and it echoes Paul's apostolic zeal: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16). In our times the challenges of the new evangelization are often presented in dramatic terms and spur the Church, in particular her Pastors, to seek new forms of missionary proclamation and action that best meet the demands of our era. Among today's most urgent pastoral tasks, I would first like to point out the need to care for communities in which there is a deeper awareness of the grace connected with the sacraments of Christian initiation, which give rise to the vocation to be Gospel witnesses in all areas of life. The dramatic events of our time spur believers to the essentials of the Christian experience and message in their everyday encounters and friendships, for a faith journey illumined by the joy of communication. Another pastoral priority, not to be underestimated, is the formation of Christian communities as authentic places of welcome for everyone, with constant care for the specific needs of each individual. Without these communities it becomes more and more difficult to grow in faith and one gives into the temptation to reduce to a

fragmentary and occasional experience precisely that faith which, on the contrary, should enliven all human experience.³ The theme of your seminar on ecclesial movements should be seen in this context. If on 30 May 1998 I spoke in St Peter's Square of "a new Pentecost", referring to the growth of charisms and movements which has occurred in the Church since the Second Vatican Council, with this expression I wished to acknowledge the development of the movements and new communities as a source of hope for the Church's missionary action. In fact, because of the secularization that has weakened or even extinguished faith in many hearts and led the way to irrational beliefs, in many parts of the world the Church finds herself facing an environment similar to that of her origins. I am well aware that in recent years movements and new communities, like any work which develops in human history, even under divine influence, have not produced only positive reactions. As I said on 30 May 1998, their "unexpected newness ... has given rise to questions, uneasiness and tensions; at times it has led to presumptions and excesses on the one hand, and on the other, to numerous prejudices and reservations" (ibid., n. 6). But in the common witness given that day by those gathered round the Successor of Peter and numerous Bishops, I saw and still see the arrival of a "new stage [that] is unfolding before you: that of ecclesial maturity", although in full knowledge that "this does not mean that all problems have been solved. Rather", this maturity "is a challenge. A road to take" (ibid.). This journey requires of movements an ever stronger communion with the Pastors God has chosen and consecrated to gather and sanctify his people in the light of faith, hope and charity, because "no charism dispenses a person from reference and submission to the Pastors of the Church" (*Christifideles laici*, n. 24). Thus it is the task of movements to share their charismatic riches with humility and generosity within the communion and mission of the local Churches. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, I ask you, whose task it is to discern the authenticity of charisms in order to make the best use of them within the Church, to show fatherly magnanimity and far-sighted charity (cf. 1 Cor 13:4) towards these realities, because every human achievement requires time and patience for its proper and indispensable purification. The Second Vatican Council's words are clear: "Those who have charge over the Church should judge the genuineness and proper use of these gifts, through their office not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to what is good (cf. 1 Thes 5:12, 19-21)" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 12), so that all charisms in their diversity and complementarity may work together for the common good (cf. ibid., n. 30). I am convinced, venerable Brothers, that your attentive and heartfelt willingness, together with appropriate meetings for prayer, reflection and friendship, will make your authority more welcome but also demanding, your instructions more effective and incisive, the ministry entrusted to you to utilize the charisms for "the common good" more fruitful. Your first duty, in fact, is to open the eyes of heart and mind to recognize the many forms of the Spirit's presence in the Church, to examine them closely and to lead them all to unity in truth and charity.⁴ In the meetings I have had with the ecclesial movements and new communities, I have frequently stressed the close connection between their experience and the reality of the local Churches and the universal Church of which they are the fruit and, at the same time, a missionary expression. Last year, in the presence of those taking part in the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements organized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity, I publicly noted "their willingness to devote their energies to the service of the See of Peter and the local Churches" (*Message for the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements and New Communities*, n. 2; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 10 June 1998, p. 2). In fact, one of the most important fruits produced by the movements is precisely that of knowing how to release in so many lay faithful, men and women, adults and young people, an intense missionary zeal, which is indispensable for the Church as she prepares to cross the threshold of the third millennium. However, this objective is only achieved where "these movements humbly seek to become part of the life of local Churches and are welcomed by Bishops and priests within diocesan and parish structures" (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 72). What does this really mean in terms of the apostolate and pastoral action? This was precisely one of the key questions at your seminar. How should this special gift which the Spirit offers to the Church

be received at our time in history? How can it be welcomed in all its importance, in all its fullness and in all its dynamism? Answering these questions in a satisfactory way is your responsibility as Pastors. Your great responsibility is not to impede the Spirit's gift, but, on the contrary, to make it bear ever greater fruit in service to all Christian people. I ardently hope that your seminar will be a source of encouragement and inspiration for many Bishops in their pastoral ministry. May Mary, Bride of the Holy Spirit, help you to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Church today (cf. Rv 2:7). I am close to you in fraternal solidarity and accompany you in prayer, as I gladly bless you and all whom divine Providence has entrusted to your pastoral care. *From the Vatican, 18 June 1999.* **JOHN PAUL II**

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