



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

**MEETING WITH THE RELIGIOUS
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

*Cathedral of Saint Mary, San Francisco
Thursday, 17 September 1987*

*Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,
Dear Religious of the United States of America,*

1. In their deepest spiritual significance, the Vespers that we are praying together are *the voice of the Bride* addressing the Bridegroom (Cfr. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 84). They are also *the voice of the Bridegroom*, "the very prayer which Christ himself, together with his body, addresses to the Father" (*Ibid.*). With one and the same voice the Bride and the Bridegroom praise the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

In this liturgical song of praise we give expression to "the real nature of the true Church"- "both human and divine, visible and yet invisibly endowed, eager to act and yet devoted to contemplation, present in the world and yet not at home in it" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2). It is precisely *the presence of God* in human life and human affairs that you proclaim through your religious consecration and the practice of the evangelical counsels. It is to the reality of *God's love in the world* that you bear witness by means of the many forms of your loving service to God's people.

2. Dear religious sisters, and religious priests and brothers: for me, this is one of the most important moments of my visit. Here, with all of you, men and women religious of the United

States, and in the spiritual presence of all the members of your congregations spread throughout this land or serving in other countries, *I give heartfelt thanks to God for each and every one of you.* He who is mighty has done great things for you, holy is his name! (Cfr. *Luc.* 1, 49)

I greet each one of you with love and gratitude. I thank you for the warm welcome you have given me and I thank Sister Helen Garvey and Father Stephen Tutas, who have presented a picture of your dedicated lives. I rejoice because of your deep love of the Church and your generous service to God's people. Every place I have visited in this vast country bears the marks of the diligent labour and immense spiritual energies of religious of both contemplative and active congregations in the Church. The extensive Catholic educational and health care systems, the highly developed network of social services in the Church - none of this would exist today, were it not for your highly motivated dedication and the dedication of those who have gone before you. The spiritual vigour of so many Catholic people testifies to the efforts of generations of religious in this land. The history of the Church in this country is in large measure *your history at the service of God's people.*

As we remember your glorious past, let us be filled with hope that *your future* will be no less beneficial for the Church in the United States, and no less a prophetic witness of God's Kingdom to each new generation of Americans.

3. The single most extraordinary event that has affected the Church in every aspect of her life and mission during the second half of the twentieth century has been the Second Vatican Council. The Council called the whole Church to conversion, to "newness of life", to renewal - to *a renewal that consists essentially in an ever increasing fidelity to Jesus Christ her divine Founder.* As "men and women who more closely follow and more clearly demonstrate the Saviour's self-giving" (*Lumen Gentium*, 42), it is only natural that religious should have experienced the call to renewal in a radical way. Thousands of religious in the United States have generously responded to this call, and continue to live it, with profound commitment. The results, the good fruits of this response are evident in the Church: we see a Gospel - inspired spirituality, which has led to a deepening of personal and liturgical prayer; a clearer sense of the Church as a communion of faith and love in which the grace and responsibility entrusted to each member are to be respected and encouraged; a new appreciation of the legacy of your founders and foundresses, so that the specific charism of each congregation stands out more clearly; a heightened awareness of the urgent needs of the modern world where religious, in close union with the bishops and in close collaboration with the whole Church, seek to carry on the work of the Good Shepherd, the Good Samaritan and the Good Teacher.

It would be unrealistic to think that such a deep and overall process of renewal could take place without risks and errors, without undue impatience on the part of some and undue fears on the part of others. Whatever the tension and polarization occasioned by change, whatever the mistakes made in the past, I am sure that all of you are convinced that the time has come *to reach*

out once again to one another in a spirit of love and reconciliation, both within and beyond your congregations.

During the past two decades, there have also been profound insights into the meaning and value of religious life. Many of these insights, conceived in the experience of prayer and penance and authenticated by the teaching charism of the Church, have contributed greatly to ecclesial life. These insights have borne witness to *the enduring identity of religious consecration and mission* in the life of the Church. At the same time they have testified to the need for religious to adapt their activity to the needs of the people of our times.

4. Fundamental to the Council's teaching on religious life is an emphasis on *the ecclesial nature of the vocation to observe the evangelical counsels*. Religious consecration " belongs inseparably to the life and holiness of the Church" (*Lumen Gentium*, 44). "The counsels are a divine gift, which the Church has received from her Lord and which she ever preserves with the help of his grace" (*Ibid.* 43). It was precisely within this ecclesial context that in 1983 I asked the bishops of the United States to render a pastoral service by offering to those of you whose institutes are engaged in apostolic works special encouragement and support in living your ecclesial vocation to the full. I now wish to thank the bishops and all of you for your very generous collaboration in this important endeavour. In particular I thank the Pontifical Commission headed by Archbishop John Quinn. By God's grace there now exists a fresh cooperative spirit between your religious institutes and the local Churches.

Your continuing participation in the mission of the Church at the diocesan and parish levels is of inestimable value to the well-being of the local Churches. Your communion with the local bishops and collaboration with the pastoral ministry of the diocesan clergy contributes to a strong and effective spiritual growth among the faithful. Your creative initiatives in favour of the poor and all marginalized persons and groups, whose needs might otherwise be neglected, are deeply appreciated. Your evangelizing and missionary work both at home and in other parts of the world is one of the great strengths of the Church in the United States. Alongside your traditional apostolates-which are as important now as ever before and which I encourage you to appreciate in their full significance - you are engaged in almost every area of defending human rights and of building a more just and equitable society. This is *a record of unselfish response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ*. Yes, the entire Church in the United States benefits from the dedication of American religious to their ecclesial mission.

5. At the same time you are concerned about certain weaknesses affecting the structure of your institutes. The decline in vocations and the aging of your membership are serious challenges for each one of your institutes and for the corporate reality of religious life, and yet these are not new phenomena in the long experience of the Church. History teaches us that in ways generally unpredictable *the radical "newness" of the Gospel message is always able to inspire successive generations* to do what you have done, to renounce all for the sake of the Kingdom of God, in

order to possess the pearl of great price (Cfr. *Matth.* 13, 44-45).

You are called at this hour to fresh courage and trust. Your *joyful witness to consecrated love* - in chastity, poverty and obedience - will be the greatest human attraction for young people to religious life in the future. When they sense the authenticity of renewal in you and your communities, they too will be disposed to come and see! The invitation is directly from Christ but they will want to hear it from you too. Your own essential contribution to vocations will come *through fidelity, penance and prayer*, and through confidence in *the power of Christ's Paschal Mystery to make all things new*.

In the best traditions of Christian love, you will know how to show your special appreciation for the aged and infirm members of your communities, whose contribution of prayer and penance, suffering and faithful love is of immense value to your apostolates. May they always be comforted in knowing that they are respected and loved within their own religious families.

6. Your vocation is, of its very nature, a radical response to the call which Jesus extends to all believers in their baptismal consecration: "*Seek first his kingship over you, his way of holiness*" (*Matth.* 6, 33). Your response is expressed by your vowed commitment to embrace and live in community the evangelical counsels. Through chastity, poverty and obedience you live in expectation of an eschatological kingdom where "they neither marry nor are given in marriage" (*Ibid.* 22, 30). And so, even now, "where your treasure is there your heart is also" (*Ibid.* 6, 21).

Through your religious profession, the consecration which the Holy Spirit worked in you at baptism is *powerfully directed anew to the perfection of charity*. By practising the vows, you constantly die with Christ in order to rise to new life with him (Cfr. *Rom.* 6, 8). In fidelity to your vow of *chastity* you are empowered to love with the love of Christ and to know that deep encounter with his love which inspires and sustains your apostolic love for your neighbour. Treading the path of *poverty* you find yourselves truly open to God and aligned with the poor and suffering in whom you see the image of the poor and suffering Christ (Cfr. *Matth.* 25, 31 ss.). And through *obedience* you are intimately united with Jesus in seeking always to fulfil the Father's will. Through such obedience there is unlocked in you *the full measure of Christian freedom* which enables you to serve God's people with selfless and unfailing devotion. The Catholic people, and indeed the vast majority of your fellow citizens, have the highest respect for your religious consecration and they look to you for the "proof" of the transcendent Christian hope that is in you (Cfr. *1Petr.* 3, 15).

7. The disciple, though, is not above the Master. It is only right for you to expect, as has always been the Church's understanding, that if you follow the laws of Christ's Kingdom - in essence, the new commandment of love and the new values proclaimed in the beatitudes - you will be *in conflict with the "wisdom of this age"* (Cfr. *1Cor.* 2, 6). In a particularly personal and courageous way, religious have always been in the front line of this never ending struggle.

Today, the encounter between the saving message of the Gospel and the forces that shape our human culture calls for *a profound and prayerful discernment* of Christ's will for his Church at this moment of her life. In this regard the Second Vatican Council remains the necessary point of reference and the guiding light. This discernment is the work of the whole Church. No person or group of people can claim to possess sufficient insights so as to monopolize it. All members of the Church, according to the ministry received for the good of the whole Body, must be humbly attuned to the Holy Spirit who guides the Church into the fullness of truth (Cfr. *Jo.* 16, 13), and produces in her the fruits of his action, which Saint Paul lists as "love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness and chastity" (*Gal.* 5, 22-23). And since the Holy Spirit has placed in the Church the special pastoral charism of the Magisterium, we know that *adherence to the Magisterium is an indispensable condition for a correct reading of "the signs of the times"* and hence a condition for the supernatural fruitfulness of all ministries in the Church.

You indeed have an important role in the Church's dialogue with the complex and varied cultural environment of the United States. The first law of this dialogue is *fidelity to Christ and to his Church*. And in this fundamental act of faith and trust you already show the world the basis of your special position within the community of God's people. Also required for this dialogue is *a true understanding of the values involved in America's historical experience*. At the same time the Christian concepts of the common good, of virtue and conscience? of liberty and justice, must be distinguished from what is sometimes inadequately presented as the expression of these realities. As religious, you are especially sensitive to the implications of this dialogue with the world in which you are called to live and work. As men and women consecrated to God, you are aware of having a special responsibility to be a sign - an authentic prophetic sign - that will speak to the Church and to the world, not in terms of easy condemnation, but humbly *showing forth the power of God's word to heal and uplift, to unite and bind with love*.

At this important moment of the history of the human family it is essential for the Church to proclaim the full truth about God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - and the full truth about our human condition and destiny as revealed in Christ and authentically transmitted through the teaching of the Church. The faithful have the right to receive the true teaching of the Church in its purity and integrity, with all its demands and power. When people are looking for a sure point of reference for their own values and their ethical choices, they turn to the special witnesses of the Church's holiness and justice-to you religious. They expect and want to be convinced by the example of your acceptance of God's word.

8. Dear sisters and brothers: *the life we now live is not our own; Christ is living in us*. We still live our human life, but it is a life of faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us (Cfr. *Gal.* 2, 20). In these words Saint Paul sums up the core of our Christian experience, and even more so *the heart of religious life*. The validity and fruitfulness of religious life depends upon *union with Jesus Christ*.

Union with Christ demands *a true interior life of prayer*, a life of closeness to him. At the same time it enables you to be effective witnesses before the world of the healing and liberating power of the Paschal Mystery. It means that above all in your own lives and in your own communities the Paschal Mystery is first being celebrated and experienced through *the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Penance*. In this way your works of charity and justice, of mercy and compassion will be true signs of Christ's presence in the world.

9. The challenges which you faced yesterday you will face again tomorrow. The thousand tasks that now draw upon your courage and your energies will hardly disappear next week, next month, next year. What then is the meaning of our meeting? What "word of the Lord" is addressed to us here? As the one who for the time being has been given the place of the Fisherman from Galilee, as the one who occupies the Chair of Peter for this fleeting hour in the Church's life, allow me to make my own the sentiments of the reading from our Evening Prayer: "*Be examples to the flock*" (1Petr. 5, 3) - examples of faith and charity, of hope and joy, of obedience, sacrifice and humble service. And "when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will win for yourselves the unfading crown of glory" (*Ibid.* 5, 4).

To the *contemplative religious* of the United States, whose lives are hidden with Christ in God, I wish to say a word of profound thanks for reminding us that "here we have no lasting city" (*Hebr.* 13, 14), and that all life must be lived in the heart of the living God. May the whole Church in this land recognize the primacy and efficacy of the spiritual values which you represent. The Second Vatican Council deliberately chose to call you "the glory of the Church" (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 7).

Brothers and sisters, men and women religious of the United States: your country needs the witness of your deep spirituality and your commitment to the life-giving power of the Gospel. America needs to see all the power of love in your hearts expressed in evangelizing zeal. The whole world needs to discover in you "the kindness and love of God our Saviour" (*Tit.* 3, 4). Go forward, therefore, in the mystery of the dying and rising of Jesus. *Go forward in faith, hope and charity, expending yourselves in the Church's mission of evangelization and service*. Always be examples to the flock. And know that "when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will win for yourselves the unfading crown of glory" (1Petr. 5, 4).

In this Marian Year of grace may you find joy and strength in an ever greater devotion to Mary, the Virgin Mother of the Redeemer. As "the model and protectress of all consecrated life" (*Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 663 § 4) may she lead each one of you to perfect union with her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and to ever closer collaboration in his redemptive mission. And may the example of *Mary's discipleship* confirm you all in generosity and love.

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