



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF PENNSYLVANIA AND NEW JERSEY
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

12 March 1998

Dear Cardinal Bevilacqua,

Dear Brother Bishops, 1. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 1:7). Continuing this series of *ad Limina* visits by the Bishops of the United States, I welcome you, the Bishops of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. I entrust the outcome of our prayer and meetings to the grace of the Holy Spirit, who "down through the centuries has drawn from the treasures of the Redemption achieved by Christ and given new life to human beings" (*Dominum et Vivificantem*, 53). The Spirit is now preparing the Church for the Great Jubilee, a time to hear anew and answer ever more decisively the call to open our hearts to the Gospel, to embrace its saving message, and to allow it to transform our lives. Approaching the Jubilee, the Shepherds of God's people have a fresh opportunity to speak out and tell the men and women of today that God has indeed come among us and that the Gospel is "the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith" (Rom 1:16). Let us pray that the Holy Spirit will further enlighten our minds regarding the "hour" that we are living and regarding the opportunities and responsibilities which this "hour" entails for the future of the Church and of society. 2. As I mentioned to the first group of Bishops from your country, the reception given to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, and the renewal of the Church envisioned by the Council, will be the guiding light of our reflections during this series of visits *ad Limina Apostolorum*. Many Catholics today have no personal recollection of the Council. But those of us who had the marvelous opportunity to take part in it experienced it as a time of extraordinary spiritual dynamism and growth. The Council brought us into close and tangible contact with the wealth of nineteen centuries of holiness, doctrine and service to the human family; it revealed to us the unity and diversity of the Catholic community throughout the world; it taught us openness to our Christian brothers and sisters, to the followers of other religions, to mankind's joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties. It is clear that in his Providence, God wanted to prepare the Church for a new springtime of the Gospel - for the beginning of the next Christian Millennium - through the extraordinary grace of the Council. Among the teachings which the Council has bequeathed to us, none has had so far-reaching an influence on the Catholic community as a whole, and on our own lives as priests and Bishops, as the Church's reflection on herself, *ad intra* and *ad extra*, in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* and the Pastoral

Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*. How deeply has the Council's vision of the Church penetrated the life of our Christian communities? What must be done to ensure that the whole Church enters the next Millennium with a clearer awareness of her own mystery, with fuller confidence in her unique importance for the human family, with ardent commitment to her mission?3. As Bishops, we have an urgent responsibility to help God's people to understand and appreciate the profound mystery of the Church: to see her above all as the community in which we meet the living God and his merciful love. It must be our pastoral objective to create a more intense awareness of the fact that God, who intervenes in history at times of his choosing, in the fullness of time sent his Son, born of a woman, for the salvation of the world (cf. Gal 4:4). This is the great truth of human history: that the history of salvation has entered the history of the world, making it a history filled with God's presence and punctuated by events overflowing with meaning for the people God calls to be his own. The redemptive work of the Son continues in the Church and through the Church. Indeed, from the beginning God "planned to assemble in the Holy Church all those who would believe in Christ" (*Lumen Gentium*, 2). In this transcendent, theological sense, the Church is the goal of all things: for God created the world in order to communicate his own infinite goodness and to draw his beloved creatures into communion with himself, a communion brought about by the *convocation* of all in Christ. This *convocation* is the Church (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 760). "Just as God's will is creation and is called 'the world', so his intention is the salvation of men, and it is called 'the Church'" (Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, I, 6, 27).4. The fundamental truth about the Church which the Council Fathers sought to underline is that she is "the kingdom of Christ now present in mystery" (*Lumen Gentium*, 3). Christ's disciples are "in the world" without being "of the world" (Jn 17:16); so they are obviously affected by the economic, social, political and cultural processes which determine how peoples and societies live and act. Thus, on her pilgrim journey through history, the Church adapts to changing circumstances while always remaining the same, in fidelity to her Lord, to his revealed word and to "what has been handed on" under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In the post-conciliar period we have been called to serve God's people in the midst of profound social change. The rapidity of change in the thirty years since the Council, and the tendency of western cultures to confine religious convictions within the private sphere, has made it difficult in some cases for Catholics to "receive" the Council's teaching on the Church's unique nature and mission. The cultural history of the United States has had a particular impact on how Catholics have perceived the Church in recent decades. It is necessary to remind everyone that, precisely because the Church is a "mystery," her reality can never be fully captured by sociological or political categories or analyses. Following the lead of Pope Pius XII in his Encyclical *Mystici Corporis*, and after a period in which ecclesiology tended to focus primarily on the Church as an institution, the Second Vatican Council sought to deepen appreciation of the Church as the sacrament of encounter with the living Christ. As Shepherds of souls, we must ask ourselves to what degree the call of *Lumen Gentium* to a more profound sense of the interior mystery of the Church has been heard. Or have Catholics sometimes succumbed to the temptation, widespread in modern western culture, to judge the Church in predominantly political terms? It was surely not the Council's intention to "politicize" the Church so that every issue became susceptible to a political label. On the contrary, it was precisely to broaden and deepen our faith in and experience of the Church as a communion that the Council Fathers described the Church through that marvelous array of Biblical images we find in *Lumen Gentium* 5 and 6, rather than in the institutional categories to which they were accustomed. Now, more than thirty years after *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, we have sufficient perspective to see that while the fruits of the Council are manifold and everywhere there are signs that the Council has brought a new steadfastness in the faith, new signs of holiness, and a new love of the Church, there are still some tendencies towards a reductive understanding of the Church. As a result, inadequate ecclesiologies, radically different from what the Council and the subsequent Magisterium have presented, have found their way into theological and catechetical works. In pastoral practice these have become

the basis of a more or less horizontal and sociological view of ecclesial realities on the part of some sectors of Catholicism. We must, therefore, look again at our efforts to teach the richly- textured ecclesiology of the Council.⁵ We can only truly appreciate what the Church is when we understand that every aspect of her being is shaped by the new relationship, the new covenant, which God established between himself and mankind through the Cross of Christ. The mystery which envelops us is a mystery of communion, a sharing through grace in the life of the Father given us through Christ in the Holy Spirit. We should never cease to reflect on the call to enter into this intimate relationship of life and love with the Most Blessed Trinity. The whole purpose of our ministry is to lead others into this communion, which is not of our own making. We have to lead the faithful to understand that we do not enter into communion with God simply through a personal option in accordance with our private tastes; we do not join the Church as we join some voluntary association. Rather, we are incorporated into the Body of Christ through the grace of Baptism and through full participation in all that constitutes the divine- human reality of the Church. The community of Christ's followers is therefore above all a spiritual solidarity, the *communio sanctorum*. We are the pilgrim People of God, journeying to our heavenly home, assisted by the intercession of Mary and the Saints who have preceded us. The Church embraces those who now see God as he is, and those who have died and are being purified. Perhaps our consciousness of this dimension of the Church's nature has decreased somewhat in recent years. More attention needs to be given to the intimate relationship between the Church on earth and the Church in heaven. Are younger Catholics sufficiently aware of the reality of Mary and the Saints? Do the example and intercession of Mary and the Saints sustain our people in responding to the universal vocation to holiness? Do we understand the Church's liturgy as a participation in the heavenly liturgy? Would a recovery of that understanding help to reinvigorate attendance at Sunday Mass?⁶ The Church in the United States has been enriched by a great diversity of expressions of faith found among people of different ethnic backgrounds. This rich diversity indicates that the Church is catholic in the full sense, embracing all peoples and cultures. Yet the Church, with all her different members, remains the one Body of Christ. Diversity in the Church must serve the unity of the one faith, the one baptism (cf. Eph 4:5), so that "speaking the truth in love, we grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together... builds itself up in love" (Eph 4:15-16). Respect for a specific culture and tradition must always be accompanied by faithfulness to the essential truth of the Gospel as passed down in the teaching of the Church. A particularly rich form of the diversity which builds up the Body of Christ is found in the Eastern-rite Churches present alongside the Latin Church in many parts of your country. I am especially pleased to greet the Archbishops and Bishops taking part in this *ad Limina* visit. The Eastern Catholics who live in the United States constitute a natural bridge between East and West. On the one hand they make known by direct experience the Christian East and, on the other, they contribute to the development of the Oriental Churches in their countries of origin by witnessing to the acquisitions of the West and by providing spiritual and material support for people in their homeland. In order to fulfill this twofold task, it is essential that they maintain and deepen the sense of belonging to their specific ecclesial tradition, making use of the indications offered in the *Instruction for the Application of the Liturgical Prescriptions of the Code of Canons of the Oriental Churches*, issued by the Congregation for the Oriental Churches. The Pastors of the Eastern Churches face new and demanding challenges in ensuring that the faithful recently arrived in the United States are properly integrated into their respective ecclesial communities. Serious consideration must also be given to ways of addressing the problems arising from the dispersal of the faithful, who continue to leave the areas where their community was traditionally present and where their ecclesial identity was more easily preserved, to live in other parts of the country. These aspects highlight the great need for close collaboration between Latin and Oriental Bishops in order to safeguard and guarantee the legitimate diversity which constitutes the richness of the Church's universality. I urge my Brother Bishops of the Latin rite to foster greater knowledge and appreciation of the Eastern heritage which is an integral part of the Catholic expression

of the faith. In this way all the faithful will have a more thorough understanding of the Christian experience, and the Catholic community will be capable of giving a more complete Christian response to the expectations of the men and women of today (cf. Apostolic Letter *Oriente Lumen*, 5).⁷ Dear Brother Bishops, as we look forward in hope to the celebration of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, I pray that the priests, deacons, religious and lay faithful of your Dioceses will be inspired to grow in their love of the Church, and thus come into an ever more profound union with Christ the Bridegroom. The most important aspect of our preparation for the celebration of the 2000th anniversary of the Incarnation is our response to the call to that holiness "without which no one shall see the Lord" (Heb 12:14). For it is only in the grace of the Holy Spirit that God's people can truly challenge society by their untiring and courageous witness to the truth. Entrusting you and all those whom you serve to the maternal care of Mary, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing. © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

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