



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE FOURTH GROUP OF FRENCH BISHOPS
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 24 January 2004

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,

1. I am pleased to be resuming my Audiences with the Bishops of France during their *ad limina* visits. I welcome you with joy, Bishops from the Provinces of Toulouse and Montpellier. I thank Archbishop Emile Marcus of Toulouse for his kind words. I am delighted with the spirit of collaboration that exists between your two Provinces, which is greatly facilitated by your historical connections and by the presence of the Catholic Institute and the Diocesan Seminary of Toulouse that accepts, in particular, seminarians from the whole region. As Head of the Episcopal Commission for Ordained Ministers, Archbishop Marcus has just told me of your perplexities and worries about the future of the clergy, recalling the particularly alarming situation that your Country is going through which, unfortunately, is verified by the quinquennial reports of the Dioceses of France. I pray to the Lord constantly that young men will hear the call to the priesthood, especially to the diocesan priesthood, and will commit themselves to follow Christ, leaving everything like the Apostles, as the text of the Gospel of the Mass that opened this year of Ordinary Time appropriately recalled (cf. Monday of the First Week, Mk 1: 14-20).

2. It is therefore this matter of the diocesan priesthood, essential for the local Churches, which I desire to discuss with you today. I can easily understand that you may sometimes feel disheartened, like your priests, in the face of the future situation and prospects. However, I would like to ask you to hope and to be ever more determined in your commitment to promote the priesthood. Although it is right to look realistically at the difficulties, you should not succumb to despair or look helplessly at the statistics and the dwindling number of priests, for which, moreover, we cannot be held totally responsible. Indeed, the *Letter to the Catholics of France*, published by your Bishops' Conference in 1996 and still applicable, emphasized that the crisis the

Church is passing through is largely due to repercussions, within the ecclesial institution as well as in the life of its members, from the social changes, the new forms of behaviour, the loss of moral and religious values and a widespread consumerist attitude. Nonetheless, with Christ's help and conscious of our heritage, in adversity we must constantly propose the priestly life to young people as a generous commitment and a source of happiness, taking care to renew and reaffirm the pastoral care of vocations.

It is first of all the priest's role that can distance young people who are often used to an easy and superficial way of life: his identity in modern society is rather uncertain and unclear while his responsibilities are increasingly heavy. It is essential to reaffirm this identity, defining the figure of the diocesan priest more clearly. In fact, how can young people be attracted by a form of life if they do not grasp its greatness and beauty, and if priests themselves do not take the trouble to express their enthusiasm for the Church's mission? A priest, a man set apart in the midst of his brothers and sisters to serve them better, finds joy and equilibrium in his life in his relationship with Christ and in his ministry. He is the pastor of the flock; he guides the People of God, celebrates the sacraments, teaches and proclaims the Gospel and also guarantees his spiritual fatherhood to accompany the faithful. In all this, he is at the same time the witness and the apostle who expresses his love for Christ, for the Church and for men and women through the many acts of his ministry.

The importance, diversity and burden of the mission that priests of this generation have to take on give the impression of a deflated ministry that certainly does not always attract the young to follow their elders. In this regard, I would like to acknowledge the courage, zeal and tenacity of priests who exercise their ministry in conditions that are often very difficult and in a society that does not recognize them properly. May they not be discouraged but find in Christ the daring to carry out the mission entrusted to them! I give thanks with them for their fidelity, a sign of their deep love for Christ and for the Church. May they never forget that through the acts of their ministry they make God's tenderness present and communicate to human beings the grace they need! Convey to them the affection of the Successor of Peter, who accompanies them daily in his prayers! Invite them, at youth meetings and in their homilies, to account for the happiness that is to be found in following Christ in the diocesan priesthood! My affectionate prayers go especially to the elderly or sick priests who, through their life of intercession and a ministry within their capacity, continue in a different way to serve the Church.

3. The mission's requirements and people's many requests put pressure on a few priests who risk neglecting their spiritual life or letting it fade into the background. Likewise, they have to coordinate the needs of daily life, of the ministry, of continuing formation and of their leisure time to restore their energy, so as not to upset the balance between their human and affective life. What matters most to priests is the edification and growth of their spiritual life, based on a daily relationship with Christ and in the celebration of the Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours, *lectio divina* and prayer. This relationship creates unity in being a priest and in the ministry. The heavier the burden a priest

must bear, the more important it is for him to be close to the Lord in order to find in him the graces he needs for his pastoral service and availability to the faithful. It is in fact this personal spiritual experience that enables him to live in fidelity and ceaselessly to rekindle the gift he has received through the laying on of hands (cf. II Tim 1: 6). As I recalled in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the response to the crises in the ministry that many countries are experiencing lies in an act of total faith to the Holy Spirit (cf. n. 1), in a better and stronger construction of the spiritual life by priests themselves, which keeps them on their demanding journey of holiness (cf. nn. 19-20), and in continuing formation which is, as it were, the soul of pastoral charity (cf. nn. 70-81). It is up to you to watch that members of the presbyterate base their mission on a life of regular and faithful prayer and on the practice of the sacrament of Penance.

4. Some priests, mainly younger ones, feel the need for a fraternal priestly experience, a community process, in order to sustain one another and to mitigate the difficulty of the inevitable loneliness associated with the ministry that some may feel although, sometimes paradoxically, they have too individualistic an approach to their ministry. I encourage them to develop their desire for fraternal life and mutual collaboration, which can only strengthen communion in the diocesan presbyterate around the Bishop. It is your task, with the members of your Episcopal Council, to take this desire into consideration by suggesting that priests enter ministries where, if possible, they can establish strong bonds with their confreres. I also ask you to be increasingly close to your priests, who are your invaluable collaborators. First of all, you must constantly develop a strong pastoral and fraternal relationship with them, marked by reciprocal confidence and affectionate closeness. It would be good if you were to pay regular visits to priests at home, as some of you already do. This will enable you to evaluate their ministry and lifestyle besides showing interest in their daily routine.

I also encourage priests of all generations to be ever closer to one another and to develop their priestly brotherhood and pastoral collaboration without fear of differences or specific sensibilities, which can further the local Church's outreach. In this spirit, participation in an association of priests is a valuable help. The stronger the bonds of communion and unity are between the Bishop and his priests, the greater the coherence of the diocese, the stronger the sense of the common mission and the more eager young men will be to join the presbyterate. Without any doubt, the fraternal life of the Church's ministers is a concrete way of presenting the faith and of appealing to the faithful to develop renewed relationships and live more deeply in the love that comes to us from the Lord. For it is by this, as the Apostle says, that we will be recognized as his disciples and able to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel. Especially in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, how can we not feel responsible for unity in the heart of the presbyterate, as St Ignatius of Antioch exhorted: "Your presbyterate, worthy of its reputation, worthy of God, should be in harmony with the Bishop as the strings of a zither are in tune; indeed, in the concord of your sentiments and the harmony of your charity, you sing of Jesus Christ.... Thus, it is useful for you to be in irreproachable unity, so as to partake in God always" (*Letter to the Ephesians*, IV, 1-2).

The disparity between Dioceses in the number of priests continues to grow. The new organization of the Church in France, now divided into Provinces, will permit interesting forms of collaboration in this area for a better distribution of priests according to need and for cooperation in diocesan services and in the different administrative bodies. In this regard, I wish to greet the Dioceses that are already experiencing this fraternal sharing. I thank the priests who are willing, at least temporarily, to leave the Diocese to which they remain legitimately bound in order to serve the Church in areas with fewer clergy out of concern to build real priestly communities; their availability is particularly eloquent.

5. In the world today, the question of ecclesiastical celibacy and the chastity associated with it is often a stumbling block for young people as well as for other members of the faithful. It is the subject of much misunderstanding in public opinion. I would like, first of all, to express my appreciation for the fidelity of those priests determined to live to the full this essential dimension of their priestly life, who thereby show the world that Christ and the mission can fulfil life. They also show their attachment to the Lord in the total gift of their vital energy, which is a witness to the absolute of God and a particularly fruitful participation in building up the Church. I ask priests to be on the alert in the face of the temptations of the world and to make a regular examination of conscience. This will enable them to live more and more deeply in fidelity to their commitment, which conforms them to Christ, chaste and totally given to the Father, and is an important contribution to the proclamation of the Gospel. Any attitude contrary to this commitment is a counter-witness for the Christian community and for humanity. It is your duty to be attentive to the emotional conditions of your priests' lives and to their possible difficulties. You know by experience that young priests, like all their contemporaries, are marked both by extraordinary enthusiasm and by the frailties of their time, which you know well. It is right to accompany them with great care, appointing for them a very wise priest to support them in the first years of their ministry. The appropriate psychological and spiritual assistance might also be necessary in order to prevent situations that might be dangerous in the long term from lasting. Likewise, in cases where priests lead a life that does not conform to their state, it is important to invite them expressly to conversion.

Chastity in celibacy is of inestimable value. It constitutes an important key to the spiritual life of priests, to their commitment to the mission and their proper pastoral relationship with the faithful. It must not be based mainly on emotional aspects, but on the responsibility incumbent on them in the ministry. Identified with Christ in this way, they will be ever more available to the Father and to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

6. In the face of the increasingly weighty responsibilities that priests must confront, it is important to help them to discern priorities and to encourage trusting collaboration with lay people, with respect for the responsibilities of each one. I know of the joy and happiness they experience in their ministry, in the proclamation of the Word of God, in their direct contacts with men, women and children, in the sharing of responsibilities with lay persons. What could be better for a pastor

than to see the faithful growing in humanity and in the faith and taking their place in the Church and in society?

Growing de-Christianization is the major challenge at the moment; I call you to take it up by mobilizing all the priests in your Dioceses. What is urgent is the mission in which all the Lord's disciples must participate and the evangelization of a world that no longer knows the fundamental aspects of Christian dogma necessary for a Christian existence and fruitful participation in sacramental life. This world, for the most part, has even forgotten the cultural elements of Christianity.

7. Permanent deacons, who are mostly married and whose numbers continue to grow in your Dioceses, have an important role in the diocesan Churches. I greet them with affection, as well as their wives and children who help them in their ministry with their closeness and support. Your reports witness to the esteem in which you hold them and the trust you place in them. I appreciate the mission they carry out, for they are sometimes in contact with milieus very far from the Church.

Their brethren recognize their professional competence and their brotherly closeness with the people and culture in which they are immersed. They present a characteristic face of the Church which likes to be close to people and their daily situation in order to plant in their lives the proclamation of Christ's message, in the same way as St Paul in Athens, as recounted in the episode of the Areopagus (cf. Acts 17: 16-32). They deserve gratitude for the mission of the Church that they carry out as servants of the Gospel, guiding the Christian people, bearing a primordial witness of the Church's attention to all categories of society, set on making the Christian message known by their words and by their personal, conjugal and family life and making men and women reflect on the great questions of society so that Gospel values may shine forth!

At the end of our meeting, I ask you to take back my affectionate greetings to all the faithful of your Dioceses, and especially, to convey my spiritual closeness to the families who were victims of the flooding that has afflicted the inhabitants of the region at various times and of the tragic accident at the AZF factory, reminding Christians and all people of good will of the need for attention and ever greater solidarity with our sorely-tried brothers and sisters.

As I entrust you, together with the priests, the deacons and the entire Christian people in your care to the motherly affection of the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and our Mother, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to all the members of your Dioceses.