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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DELL'INDIA

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A fine mattinata, nella Sala Clementina del Palazzo Apostolico Vaticano, il Santo Padre ha ricevuto in Udienza il gruppo degli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale dell'India delle Province Ecclesiastiche di Calcutta, Guwahati, Imphal e Shillong, incontrati questa mattina e ricevuti in questi giorni, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum".

Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che il Papa ha loro rivolto:

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. As this series of *Ad Limina* visits of the Latin Rite Bishops of India begins, I warmly welcome you, the Pastors of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Calcutta, Guwahati, Imphal and Shillong. Together we give thanks to God for the graces bestowed on the Church in your country, and recall the words of our Lord to his disciples as he ascended into heaven: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (*Mt 28:20*). During this Easter Season, you are here at the tombs of Saints Peter and Paul to express again your particular relationship with the universal Church and with the Vicar of Christ.

I thank Archbishop Sirkar for the warm sentiments and good wishes he has conveyed on behalf of the Episcopate, clergy, Religious and faithful of the Ecclesiastical Provinces here represented. By God's grace I have been able to visit your homeland on two occasions and have had first-hand experience of warm Indian hospitality, so much a part of the rich cultural heritage which marks your nation. Since the earliest days of Christianity, India has celebrated the mystery of salvation contained in the Eucharist which mystically joins you with other faith communities in the "oneness of time" of the Paschal Sacrifice (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 5). I pray that the faithful of India will continue to grow in unity as their participation in the celebration of the Mass confirms them in strength and purpose.

2. We must always be mindful of the fact that "the Church evangelizes in obedience to Christ's command, in the

knowledge that every person has the right to hear the Good News of the God who reveals and gives himself in Christ" (op. cit., 20). For centuries Catholics in India have been carrying on the essential work of evangelization, especially in the fields of education and social services, freely offered to Christians and non-Christians alike. In parts of your nation the road to a life in Christ is still one of extreme hardship. It is most disconcerting that some who wish to become Christians are required to receive the permission of local authorities, while others have lost their right to social assistance and family support. Still others have been ostracized or driven out of their villages. Unfortunately, certain fundamentalist movements are creating confusion among some Catholics and even directly challenging any attempt at evangelization. It is my hope that as leaders in the faith you will not be discouraged by these injustices but rather continue to engage society in such a way that these alarming trends can be reversed. It should also be noted that obstacles to conversion are not always external but may occur within your own communities. This can happen when those of other religions see disagreement, scandal and disunity within our Catholic institutions. For this reason it is important that priests, Religious and lay people should all work together and especially cooperate with their Bishop, who is the sign and source of unity. It is the Bishop's responsibility to support those involved in the vital task of evangelization by ensuring that they never lose the missionary zeal which is central to our lives in Christ. I am convinced that because of these challenges you will continue to preach the Good News with even greater courage and conviction. "What counts, here as in every area of Christian life, is the confidence that comes from faith, from the certainty that it is not we who are the principle agents of the Church's mission, but Jesus Christ and his Spirit" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 36).

3. Fundamental to sustained efforts of evangelization is the development of a local Church which is itself poised to become missionary (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 48). This presumes the eventual emergence of a well-trained local clergy able not only to look after the needs of those under its care, but also ready to embrace the mission *ad gentes*. As I said during my first Pastoral Visit to India, "A vocation is both a sign of love and an invitation to love. The decision to say 'yes' to Christ's call carries with it a number of important consequences: the need to give up other plans, a willingness to leave behind people who are dear, a readiness to set out with deep trust along the path that will lead to ever closer union with Christ" (*Homily at Pune*, 10 February 1986, 3).

The commitment to follow Christ as a priest requires the best training possible. "To serve the Church as Christ intends, Bishops and priests need solid and continuing formation, which should provide opportunities for human, spiritual and pastoral renewal as well as courses on theology, spirituality and the human sciences" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 43). Candidates for the priesthood must understand as fully as possible the Mystery they will celebrate and the Gospel they will preach. To be applauded are the initiatives you have already taken to ensure that your institutes of priestly formation reach the high standards of education and training necessary for today's clergy, and I encourage you to continue this endeavour, ensuring that those called will be truly prepared to act "in the name and in the person of him who is Head and Shepherd of the Church" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 35).

4. Through the Body and Blood of Christ the Church is granted the spiritual power necessary to spread the Good News. "The Eucharist thus appears as both the source and the summit of all evangelization, since its goal is the communion of mankind with Christ and in him with the Father and the Holy Spirit" (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 22). As Bishops, you are well aware that every Diocese is responsible for primary evangelization and for the continuing formation of the laity. In India, as in many other countries, much of this work is done by catechists. These workers in the Lord's vineyard are much more than teachers. Not only do they educate people in the tenets of faith, but they also perform so many other duties which are integral to the mission of the Church. These include: working with people in small groups; assisting with prayer services and music; preparing the faithful to receive the sacraments, most especially the sacrament of marriage; training other catechists; burying the dead and, in many cases, helping the priest with the day to day administration of the parish or outstation. In order to be effective in this apostolate, catechists require not only adequate preparation but also the knowledge that their Bishops and priests are there to offer them the spiritual and moral support necessary for the effective transmission of the word of God (cf. *Catechesi Tradendae*, 24, 63, 64).

5. All the Christian faithful are called to "be committed to change their lives and make them in a certain way completely Eucharistic. This entails a love for the poor and a desire to alleviate their suffering. For it is unworthy of a Christian community to partake of the Lord's Supper amid division and indifference towards the poor" (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 20). India is fortunate to have a direct reminder of the Church's vocation to love the weakest in the witness and example of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, soon to be beatified. Her life of joyful sacrifice

and unconditional love for the poor stir in us a desire to do likewise. For to love the least among us without expecting anything in return is truly to love Christ. "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink" (*Mt 25:35*).

Dear Bishops, like Mother Teresa you too are called to be outstanding examples of simplicity, humility and charity for those entrusted to your care. I am heartened by the ways you already demonstrate love for the poor. Your Dioceses boast many programmes designed to assist them: homes for the destitute, leprosaria, orphanages, hostels, family centres and vocational training centres, to name but a few. As the Church in India continues to confront these challenges, notwithstanding severe shortages of personnel and resources, I pray that you will use the example of Mother Teresa as a model for the works of charity in your communities.

6. Today's world is so infatuated with material things that often even the wealthy find themselves caught in the mad rush for more, in a futile attempt to fill the emptiness of their daily existence. This is an especially alarming tendency among our young people, many of whom live in spiritual poverty, seeking answers in ways that only produce more questions. For the Christian, however, it must be different. Our eyes have been opened by Jesus Christ, and so we are able to recognize the foolishness of such temptations. All Christians, and in a special way Bishops, priests and Religious are called to stand apart, living simple yet fulfilling lives of evangelical poverty, witnessing to the fact that God is the true wealth of the human heart.

In a world in which so many people have so many questions, it is only through Christ that they can hope to find sure answers. Sometimes, however, the clarity of the response is muddled by a modern culture which reflects not only a crisis of conscience and of the sense of God but also a "progressive weakening of the sense of sin" (cf. *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 18). Indeed, only an active and engaged participation in the mystery of reconciliation can bring true peace and a genuine response to the burdens which weigh on the soul. I am pleased to hear that in many of your Dioceses the faithful frequently avail themselves of the grace of the sacrament of Reconciliation, and I encourage you to continue to stress the importance of this sacrament.

7. Dear Brother Bishops, as you return to your respective Dioceses it is my hope that you will take with you a renewed sense of your pastoral responsibilities. I pray that you will be filled with the same zeal as the first disciples to whom the ascending Christ left the instructions: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (*Mt 28:20*). To the intercession of Mary, woman of the Eucharist, I commend the sufferings and joys of your local Churches and the whole Catholic community in your country. To all of you and to the clergy, Religious and laity of your Dioceses I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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