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

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Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che il Santo Padre Giovanni Paolo II ha rivolto agli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale dell'India, incontrati questa mattina e ricevuti nei giorni scorsi, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum":

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

My Dear Brother Bishops,

1. "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his love endures forever" (*Ps* 118:1). It is fitting that I use these words from the Psalms as I welcome you, the Pastors of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Madras-Mylapore, Madurai and Pondicherry-Cuddalore, at the conclusion of this series of *Ad Limina* visits of the Bishops of India. In particular I wish to greet Archbishop Arul Das and thank him for the sentiments he has conveyed on behalf of you all.

My previous addresses to your brother Bishops have frequently examined the importance of promoting a true spirit of solidarity in the Church and in society. It is not enough that the Christian community hold the principle of solidarity as a lofty ideal; rather it must be seen as the norm for human interaction which, in the words of my venerable predecessor Pope Pius XII, has been "sealed by the sacrifice of redemption offered by Jesus Christ on the altar of the Cross to his Heavenly Father, on behalf of sinful humanity" (*Summi Pontificatus*). Being successors of Christ's Apostles, we have a primary duty to encourage all men and women to develop this solidarity into a "spirituality of communion" for the good of the Church and humanity (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, 22). As I share these thoughts with you today, I wish to place my reflections in the context of this fundamental principle of human and Christian relations.

2. We cannot hope to spread this spirit of unity among our brothers and sisters without genuine solidarity among peoples. Like so many places in the world, India is beset by numerous social problems. In some ways, these challenges are exacerbated because of the unjust system of caste division which denies the human dignity of entire groups of people. In this regard, I repeat what I said during my first pastoral visit to your country:

"Ignorance and prejudice must be replaced by tolerance and understanding. Indifference and class struggle must be turned into brotherhood and committed service. Discrimination based on race, colour, creed, sex or ethnic origin must be rejected as totally incompatible with human dignity" (*Homily at the Mass in Indira Gandhi Stadium, New Delhi on 2 February 1986*).

I commend the many initiatives that have been implemented by the Bishops' Conference and individual Churches to fight this injustice. The brave steps you have taken to remedy this problem, such as those of the Tamil Nadu Bishops' Council in 1992, stand out as examples for others to follow. At all times, you must continue to make certain that special attention is given to those belonging to the lowest castes, especially the Dalits. They should never be segregated from other members of society. Any semblance of a caste-based prejudice in relations between Christians is a countersign to authentic human solidarity, a threat to genuine spirituality and a serious hindrance to the Church's mission of evangelization. Therefore, customs or traditions that perpetuate or reinforce caste division should be sensitively reformed so that they may become an expression of the solidarity of the whole Christian community. As the Apostle Paul teaches us, "if one member suffers, all suffer together" (1 *Cor* 12:26). It is the Church's obligation to work unceasingly to change hearts, helping all people to see every human being as a child of God, a brother or sister of Christ, and therefore a member of our own family.

3. Genuine communion with God and others leads all Christians to proclaim the Good News to those who have neither seen nor heard (cf. 1 *Jn* 1:1). The Church has been given the unique mission to serve "the Kingdom by spreading throughout the world the 'Gospel values' which are an expression of the Kingdom and which help people to accept God's plan" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 20). Indeed, it is this evangelical spirit which encourages even those of different traditions to work together towards the common goal of spreading the Gospel (cf. *Address to the Syro-Malabar Bishops of India*, 13 May 2003).

Many of you have expressed the hope that the Church in India will continue her efforts to remain actively engaged in the "new evangelization". This is of special importance in modern societies, in which large portions of the population find themselves in desperate situations often leading them to seek quick and easy solutions to complicated problems. This sense of hopelessness may explain, in part, why so many people, young and old alike, are attracted to fundamentalist sects offering short-lived emotional fervour and an assurance of wealth and worldly achievement. Our response to this must be one of "re-evangelization", and the success of this depends on our ability to show people the emptiness of such promises, while convincing them that Christ and his Body share their sufferings, and reminding them to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (*Mt* 6:33).

4. In my recent Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Gregis*, I noted that the Bishop is the "minister of grace of the high priesthood", exercising his office through his preaching, spiritual guidance and celebration of the sacraments (cf. No. 32). As Pastors of the Lord's flock, you are keenly aware that you cannot effectively discharge your duties without dedicated co-workers to assist you in your office. For this reason, it is essential that you continue to promote solidarity among the clergy and greater unity between bishops and their presbyterates. I remain confident that the priests in your country "will live and work in a spirit of communion and cooperation with the Bishops and all the faithful, bearing witness to the love of Jesus declared to be the true mark of his disciples" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 43).

Unfortunately, even those who have been ordained to service can at times fall victim to unhealthy cultural or societal trends which undermine their credibility and seriously hamper their mission. As men of faith, priests must not let the temptation of power or material gain distract them from their vocations, nor can they permit ethnic or caste difference to detract from their fundamental charge to spread the Gospel. As fathers and brothers, Bishops are to love and respect their priests. Likewise, priests should love and honour their Bishops. You and your priests are heralds of the Gospel and builders of unity in India. Personal differences or accidents of birth must never undermine this essential role (cf. *Address to the Priests of India*, Goa, 7 February 1986).

5. A firm commitment to mutual support ensures our unity in mission, which is founded on Christ himself and "enables us to approach all cultures, all ideological concepts, all people of good will" (*Redemptor Hominis*, 12). We should ever keep in mind the words of Saint Paul when he taught that "none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself" (*Rom* 14:7). The Church also urges the faithful to enter with prudence and charity into

discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Once we have engaged these brothers and sisters of ours, we are able to focus our efforts towards a lasting solidarity among religions. Together we shall strive to acknowledge our duty to foster unity and charity between individuals by reflecting on what we share in common and what can further promote fellowship among us (cf. *Nostra Aetate*, 1, 2).

Encouraging the truth requires a profound respect for everything that has been brought about in man by the Spirit, which "blows where it wills" (*Jn* 3:8). The truth which has been revealed to us obliges us to be its guardian and its teacher. In transmitting the truth of God we must always maintain "a deep esteem for man, for his intellect, his will, his conscience and his freedom. Thus the human person's dignity itself becomes part of the content of the proclamation of the truth, being included not necessarily in words but by an attitude towards it" (cf. *Redemptor Hominis*, 12). The Catholic Church in India has consistently promoted the dignity of every person and fostered the corresponding right of all peoples to religious freedom. Her encouragement of tolerance and respect of other religions is demonstrated by the many programmes of interreligious exchange which you have developed on both national and local levels. I encourage you to continue these frank and helpful discussions with those of other religions. Such discussions will help us to cultivate this mutual search for truth, harmony and peace.

6. My dear Brothers, Shepherds of the People of God, at the beginning of the third millennium let us rededicate ourselves to the work of bringing men and women together into a unity of purpose and understanding. It is my prayer that your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul will have renewed the strength you need to develop an authentic spirituality of communion which teaches all people how to "make room" for their brothers and sisters while "bearing each other's burdens" (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43). I commend you, your priests, religious and lay faithful to the intercession of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta and to the protection of Mary, Mother of the Church. As a pledge of peace and joy in Christ our Lord, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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