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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DEGLI STATI UNITI D'AMERICA (REGIONE II)

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Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che Giovanni Paolo II ha rivolto agli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale degli Stati Uniti d'America (Regione II), incontrati questa mattina e ricevuti nei giorni scorsi, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum":

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. It gives me great joy today to welcome you, the Pastors of the Church in New York, in the context of the continuing series of visits *ad limina Apostolorum* by the American Bishops. I greet you in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, through whom we give thanks always to our heavenly Father "whose power now at work in us can do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine" (*Eph 3:20*).

In previous meetings with your fellow Bishops from the United States, attention has been focused on the sacred duty to sanctify and teach the People of God. With the group that preceded you I began to reflect on the great responsibility of governing the faithful. Let us continue today to examine this same *munus regendi*, which must always be carried out in the spirit of the exhortation found in the Rite of Ordination of a Bishop: "The title of Bishop is one of service, not of honor, and therefore a Bishop should strive to benefit others rather than to lord it over them. Such is the precept of the Master" (Roman Pontifical, *Rite of Ordination of a Bishop*: Homily; cf. *Pastores Gregis*, 43).

2. In your Particular Churches, you are called to act *nomine Christi*. Indeed, it is as vicars and ambassadors of Christ that you govern the portion of the flock entrusted to you (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 27). As shepherds, you "have the task of gathering together the family of the faithful and . . . fostering charity and brotherly communion" (*Pastores Gregis*, 5). Yet your immediate function as pastors cannot be isolated from your wider responsibility for the universal Church; as members of the College of Bishops, *cum et sub Petro*, you in fact share in solicitude for the entire people of God, received through episcopal ordination and hierarchical communion (cf. *Lumen*

Gentium, 23). Moreover, while guaranteeing the communion of your Dioceses with the Church throughout the world, you also enable the universal Church to draw upon the life and the charisms of the local Church in a spiritual "exchange of gifts". Authentic "catholic" unity presupposes this mutual enrichment in the one Spirit.

Considered within a properly theological context, "power of governance" emerges as something more than mere "administration" or the exercise of organizational skills: it is a means for building up the Kingdom of God. I would encourage you, therefore, to continue to lead by example, in order to evangelize your flock for their own sanctification, thereby preparing them to share the Good News with others. Foster communion among them so as to equip them for the Church's mission. As you embrace lovingly the three-fold *munera* entrusted to you, remember that your sacred responsibility to teach, sanctify and govern cannot be surrendered to anyone else: it is your personal vocation.

3. I am grateful for the deep affection which American Catholics have traditionally felt for the Successor of Peter, as well as their sensitivity and generosity to the needs of the Holy See and the universal Church. The Bishops of the United States have always shown a great love for the one in whom the Lord established "the lasting and visible source and foundation of the unity both of faith and of communion" (*Lumen Gentium*, 18). Your abiding loyalty to the Roman Pontiff has led you to seek ways to strengthen the bond linking the Church in America with the Apostolic See. These devoted sentiments are a fruit of the hierarchical communion linking all members of the episcopal College with the Pope. At the same time, they constitute a great spiritual resource for the renewal of the Church in the United States. In encouraging your people to deepen their fidelity to the Magisterium and their union of mind and heart with the Successor of Peter, you offer them the inspirational leadership that is needed to carry them forward into the Third Millennium.

4. One of the fruits of the Second Vatican Council was a fresh understanding of episcopal collegiality. Among the ways in which this ecclesial vision is realized at the level of the local Church is through the activity of Episcopal Conferences. Bishops today can only fulfill their office fruitfully when they work harmoniously and closely with their fellow Bishops (cf. *Christus Dominus*, 37, *Apostolos Suos*, 15). For this reason, constant reflection is needed on the relationship between the Episcopal Conference and the individual Bishop.

My dear Brothers in the episcopate, I pray that you will work diligently with one another, in that spirit of cooperation and unanimity of heart that should always characterize the community of disciples (cf. *Acts* 4:32; *Jn* 13:35; *Phil* 2:2). The Apostle's words apply in a special way to those charged with the salvation of souls: "I beg you, Brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to agree in what you say. Let there be no factions; rather, be united in mind and judgment" (*1 Cor* 1:10).

As Church leaders, you will realize that there can be no unity of praxis without an underlying consensus, and this, of course, can only be attained through frank dialogue and informed discussions, based on sound theological and pastoral principles. Solutions to difficult questions emerge when they are thoroughly and honestly examined, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Spare no effort to ensure that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops serves as an ever more effective means of strengthening your ecclesial communion and assisting you in shepherding your brothers and sisters in Christ.

5. Without prejudice, therefore, to the God-given authority of a Diocesan Bishop over his Particular Church, the Episcopal Conference should assist him in carrying out his mission in harmony with his brother Bishops. The structures and procedures of a Conference should never become unduly rigid; instead, through constant reassessment and reappraisal, they should be adapted to suit the changing needs of the Bishops. In order for a Conference to fulfill its proper function, care should be taken to ensure that the offices or commissions within a Conference strive "to be of help to the Bishops and not to substitute for them, and even less to create an intermediate structure between the Apostolic See and individual Bishops" (*Pastores Gregis*, 63).

6. Brothers, I pray that at every opportunity you will be able to work together, so that the Gospel may be more effectively proclaimed throughout your country. I wish to express my appreciation for all that you have already accomplished together, particularly in your statements on life issues, education and peace. I invite you now to turn your attention to the many other pressing issues that directly affect the Church's mission and her spiritual

integrity, for example the decline in Mass attendance and in recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the threats to marriage and the religious needs of immigrants. Let your voice be clearly heard, announcing the message of salvation in season and out of season (cf. *2 Tim* 4:1). Confidently preach the Good News so that all may be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (cf. *1 Tim* 2:4).

7. As I conclude my remarks today, I make my own the words of Saint Paul: "Encourage one another. Live in harmony and peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you" (*2 Cor* 13:11). Entrusting you and your priests, deacons, religious and lay faithful to the intercession of Mary, Mother of America (cf. *Ecclesia in America*, 76), I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of grace and strength in her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

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