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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DELLO SRI LANKA

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Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che Benedetto XVI ha rivolto agli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale dello Sri Lanka, 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. In these still early days of my Pontificate, I am glad to welcome you, the Pastors of the Church in Sri Lanka, on your visit *ad limina Apostolorum* - the first to take place since my election. I thank you for the gracious words addressed to me on your behalf by Bishop Joseph Vianney Fernando, President of your Episcopal Conference. You come from a Continent particularly marked by a wealth of cultures, languages and traditions (cf. *Ecclesia in Asia*, 50) and you bear witness to the deep faith of your people in Jesus Christ, the sole Redeemer of the world. I pray that your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul may renew your commitment to serve and proclaim Christ with conviction, so that your people may grow in knowledge and love of him who came so that all "may have life and have it abundantly" (*Jn* 10:10).

2. Together with countless others throughout the world, I was deeply disturbed to observe the devastating effects of the tsunami last December, which claimed a vast number of lives in Sri Lanka alone, and left hundreds of thousands homeless. Please accept my profound sympathy and that of Catholics everywhere for all who have endured such terrible losses. In the faces of the bereaved and dispossessed, we cannot fail to recognize the suffering face of Christ, and indeed it is he whom we serve when we show our love and compassion to those in need (cf. *Mt* 25:40).

The Christian community has a particular obligation to care for those children who have lost their parents as a result of the natural disaster. To these most vulnerable members of society the Kingdom of heaven belongs (cf. *Mt* 19:14), yet so often they are simply forgotten or shamelessly exploited as soldiers, labourers, or innocent

victims in the trafficking of human beings. No effort should be spared to urge civil authorities and the international community to fight these abuses and to offer young children the legal protection they justly deserve.

Even in the darkest moments of our lives, we know that God is never absent. Saint Paul reminds us that "in everything God works for good with those who love him" (*Rom 8:28*), and this was manifested in the unprecedented generosity of the humanitarian response to the tsunami. I want to commend all of you for the outstanding way in which the Church in Sri Lanka struggled to meet the material, moral, psychological and spiritual needs of the victims. We can recognize further signs of God's goodness in the partnership and collaboration of so many diverse elements of society in the relief effort. It was heartening to see members of different religious and ethnic groups in Sri Lanka and throughout the global community coming together to show their solidarity towards the afflicted and rediscovering the fraternal bonds that unite them. I am confident that you will find ways of building further on the fruits of this cooperation, especially by ensuring that aid is offered freely to all who are in need.

3. The Church in Sri Lanka is young - a third of the population of your country is under the age of fifteen - and this gives great hope for the future. Religious education in schools must therefore be a high priority. Whatever difficulties you may encounter in this area, do not be deterred from carrying out your responsibility. Seminaries, likewise, require particular attention on the part of the Bishops (*Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops*, 84-91), and I urge you to be ever vigilant in maintaining a sound spiritual and theological formation for your seminarians. They need to be inspired to exercise their future apostolate in a way that will attract others to follow Christ - the more holy, the more joyful and the more impassioned they are in their priestly ministry, the more fruitful it will be (cf. *Letter of the Holy Father John Paul II to Priests for Holy Thursday 2005*, 7). It is gratifying to know that your country is already blessed with a good number of priestly vocations, and I pray that many more young people will recognize and respond to God's call to give themselves completely for the sake of the Kingdom.

4. To conclude my remarks with you today, I put before you the image of the disciples on the Road to Emmaus, so recently invoked by my beloved predecessor to guide us in this Year of the Eucharist. Christ himself accompanied them on their journey. He opened their eyes to the truth contained in the Scriptures, he rekindled their hope and he revealed himself to them in the breaking of the bread (cf. *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, 1). He also accompanies you as you lead your people forward along the path of discipleship. Renew your trust in him! Open your hearts to him! Plead with him, in union with the whole Church throughout the world: "*Mane nobiscum, Domine*".

Entrusting you and your priests, deacons, religious and lay faithful to the intercession of Mary, Woman of the Eucharist, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of grace and strength in her Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

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