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## VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DELLA SCANDINAVIA

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Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che il Santo Padre ha rivolto agli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale della Scandinavia, incontrati questa mattina e ricevuti in questi giorni, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum":

### • DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. "Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord" (1 Tim 1:2). With fraternal affection I warmly welcome you, the Bishops of Scandinavia. Your first visit *ad Limina Apostolorum* in this new millennium is an occasion to renew your commitment to proclaim ever more courageously the Gospel of Jesus Christ in truth and love. As pilgrims to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, you "come to see Peter" (cf. Gal 1:18) and his collaborators in the service of the universal Church. You thus confirm your "unity in the same faith, hope and charity, and more and more recognize and treasure that immense heritage of spiritual and moral wealth that the whole Church, joined with the Bishop of Rome by the bond of communion, has spread throughout the world" (*Pastor Bonus*, Appendix I, 3).

2. As Bishops, you have been endowed with the authority of Christ (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 25) and entrusted with the task of bearing witness to his saving Gospel. The faithful of Scandinavia, with great expectation, look to you to be steadfast teachers of the faith, selfless in your readiness to speak the truth "in season and out of season" (2 Tim 4:2). By your personal witness to the living mystery of God (cf. *Catechesi Tradendae*, 7), you make known the boundless love of him who has revealed himself and his plan for humanity through Jesus Christ. In this way eloquent testimony is borne to God's extraordinary "yes" to humanity (cf. 2 Cor 1:20) and you yourselves are strengthened in your preaching of Jesus Christ, who is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6).

It is this message that needs to be heard today, clearly and unambiguously. In a world fraught with scepticism

and confusion, it may seem to some that the light of Christ has been obscured. Indeed, modern societies and cultures are often marked by a secularism that easily leads to a loss of the sense of God, and without God the proper sense of man is soon lost as well. "When the Creator is forgotten the creature itself grows unintelligible" (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 36): people are no longer able to see themselves as "mysteriously different" from other earthly creatures and lose sight of the transcendent character of human existence. This is the context in which the liberating truth of Christ must resound: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (*Jn* 8:32). We are speaking here of the fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of earthly existence and which forms the basis of the Gospel we preach, the "Gospel of life". In fact, it is the profound and persuasive echo of this sublime truth in the heart of every person — believer and non-believer alike — that "marvellously fulfils all the heart's expectations while infinitely surpassing them" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 2).

3. A central aspect of the "new evangelization" to which I have called the entire Church is the evangelization of culture. For "at the heart of every culture lies the attitude man takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God. When this question is eliminated, the culture and moral life of nations are corrupted" (*Centesimus Annus*, 24). The challenge facing you, dear Brothers, is to see that the voice of Christianity is heard in the public arena and that the values of the Gospel are brought to bear in your societies and cultures. I am pleased to note in this regard the positive impact of your pastoral letters and statements on matters of contemporary concern in your countries.

For example, in your recent Pastoral Letter on marriage and family life you addressed many difficulties that beset Christian families. Observing how the sacredness of marriage is obfuscated by its equation with various forms of cohabitation and noting the negative effects of divorce in your societies, you encourage married couples to preserve and develop the value of marital indissolubility. Thus you help them to become a precious sign of the unfailing fidelity and selfless love of Christ himself (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 20).

The institution of marriage, in fact, was willed by God from the very beginning and finds its fullest significance in the teaching of Christ. What more wondrous and joyous a moment is there for married couples, as they participate in God's act of creation, than the birth of their children? And what greater sign of hope is there for humanity than new life? The truth of human sexuality becomes clearly seen in the mutual love of spouses and their acceptance of "the greatest possible gift, the gift by which they become cooperators with God for giving life to a new human person" (*ibid.*, 14). Encouraging the faithful to promote the dignity of marriage and teaching them to treasure its indissoluble nature is nothing less than helping them to share in the love of God, which is perfect, complete, and always life-giving.

4. The people of Scandinavia are well known for their participation in peace-keeping missions, their deep sense of responsibility in the face of ecological crises, and their generosity in providing humanitarian aid. True humanism, however, always includes God. Otherwise it will eventually, even if unintentionally, deny human beings their proper place in creation and will fail to acknowledge fully the dignity which belongs to every person (cf. *Christifideles Laici*, 5). Therefore you must help your respective cultures to draw on their rich Christian heritage in shaping their understanding of the human person. In Christ all people are brothers and sisters, and our gestures of solidarity towards them become acts of love and fidelity to Christ, who said whatever you do to one of the least of these, you do to me (cf. *Mt* 25:45). This is the foundation of the culture of life and the civilization of love that we seek to build up, and it is also the perspective underlying your efforts to welcome the growing number of migrants in the Nordic lands.

5. Your local ecumenical programmes are likewise a source of encouragement, for the united witness of all Christians will do much to bring Gospel values to bear in society and advance the kingdom of God in our midst. Awareness of the common history shared by Christians has given rise to a "rediscovered brotherhood" from which spring many of the fruits of ecumenical dialogue — joint statements (not least of which is the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*), shared prayer, solidarity in service to humanity. Correctly understood, ecumenism forms part of the commitment of all Christians to bear witness to their faith. While the ecumenical path rightly focuses on what we have in common, it must not of course neglect or gloss over the very real difficulties still facing us on the road to unity. Although full communion in faith does not yet exist, this should not cause despair but should prompt all believers to deepen their commitment to pray fervently and work resolutely for that unity which Christ wills for his Church (cf. *Jn* 17:20-21).

6. Brothers, the new millennium demands a "new impetus in Christian living" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 29). Men and women the world over are searching for meaning in their lives; they need believers who not only "speak" to them of Christ but also "show" him to them. It is in our own contemplation of the face of Christ (cf. *ibid.*, 16) that we come to make his light shine ever more brightly for others. Indispensable in this regard is the provision of formation programmes for children, youth and adults. Such pastoral initiatives, adapted to the particular circumstances of your people, will produce great fruits of holiness among them and will assist those who know little of Jesus Christ yet seek direction in their lives.

Fundamental to your mission is the continuing formation of diocesan clergy and Religious as well as the adequate training of seminarians. Moreover, promotion of vocations to the priesthood and religious life must also be seen as a priority as you face the challenges of evangelization in the Third Christian Millennium. In this way, you will work to ensure that a sufficient number of men and women respond to Christ's call. Some of your local churches even now are experiencing growth in vocations to the consecrated life. This is a clear sign of a renewed interest in spirituality and reflects the desire, especially among young people, to deepen awareness and understanding of the faith. I encourage you in your role as Pastors to nurture this growth, doing all you can to facilitate the dynamic presence of religious and contemplative communities among your people, and providing the necessary human and spiritual support for your diocesan priests.

7. Dear Brothers in the Episcopacy, with fraternal affection I gladly share these reflections with you and encourage you in exercising the charism of truth which the Spirit has bestowed upon you. I assure you of my prayers as you continue to shepherd in love the flocks entrusted to your care. United in our proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ, renewed in the enthusiasm of the first Christians, and guided by the example of the Saints, let us go forward in hope! In this Year of the Rosary, may Mary, Mother of the Church, be your sure guide as you "seek to do what Jesus tells you" (cf. *Jn* 2:5). Commending you to her maternal protection, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to the priests, Religious, and lay faithful of your Dioceses.

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