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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 al gruppo degli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale dell'India delle Province Ecclesiastiche di Agra, Delhi e Bhopal, 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. With joy I welcome the Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Agra, Delhi and Bhopal. I express once more to you and the beloved people of your country my deep affection: "God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the Gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers" (Rom 1:9). I am especially pleased to greet Archbishop Concessao, and I thank him for the sentiments he conveyed on behalf of the Bishops, clergy and faithful of your Dioceses.

Among the many important events that have occurred in the life of the Church in India since your last *Ad Limina* visit is the creation of the new Diocese of Jhabua. As you gather at the tombs of the Apostles to express the solidarity between Peter and your local Churches, the presence of the Pastor of a new flock is an encouraging sign of the vitality and growth of the Faith in your land.

2. The Apostle Thomas, Saint Francis Xavier and Mother Theresa of Calcutta are but a few of the outstanding examples of the missionary zeal which has always been present in India. It is this same spirit of evangelization which continues to give the faithful of your country the desire to proclaim Jesus Christ, even when faced with extreme hardship. As Bishops, you are well aware that together with clergy and religious, lay people are central to the mission of the Church, especially in areas where the Christian population is sparse. "Their activity in ecclesial communities is so necessary that, for the most part, the apostolate of the pastors cannot be fully effective without it" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church,* 900). You have taken the Lord's words to heart in asking your flock to "go into the vineyard too" (Mt 20:7). This is clearly demonstrated in the serious way you prepare the laity to assist their Bishops and clergy in the spread of the Gospel. At the same time, the willingness of the

faithful to labour alongside their priests is concretely manifested in their impressive involvement in catechesis, pastoral councils, small Christian communities, prayer groups and many programmes of social outreach and human development.

Training people to meet ably the demands of being responsible Catholics requires that they become ever more conformed to Christ by participation in the three *munera* of priest, prophet and king. This is not to be understood as an expansion of the clerical role but as a reality shared by every Christian in the grace received at Baptism and Confirmation. These Christian duties become even more imperative in areas such as yours which are not fortunate enough to have a resident priest in every community. Lay faithful who find themselves without an ordained minister in their village or town see before them an even greater challenge to promote the Faith in many diverse ways: by assisting in leading the traditional morning and evening prayers, as so many of your families do; by serving as catechists or by contributing to the development of a pastoral plan or vision. All these responsibilities, small and large alike, are ways of giving oneself as both a witness and an instrument of the "mission of the Church herself ‘according to the measure of Christ’s bestowal’" (cf. Eph 4:7 and *Lumen Gentium* 33§2).

3. From the very earliest days of her presence on Indian soil, the Catholic Church has demonstrated a deep social resolve in the fields of healthcare, development, welfare and especially education. The Second Vatican Council reminds us that Catholic education is a key factor in preparing young Catholics to become faithful adults. "Such an education not only develops the maturity of the human person, but is especially directed toward ensuring that those who have been baptised, become daily more appreciative of the gift of faith which they have received" (cf. *Gravissimum Educationis*, 2). Many of your schools have large percentages of teachers and students who are not Catholic. Their presence in our institutions could help to increase mutual understanding between Catholics and those of other religions at a time in which misunderstandings can be a source of suffering to many. It could also be an opportunity for non-Catholic students to be educated in a system which has proven its ability to form young people into responsible and productive citizens.

One of the greatest contributions our educational facilities, and all Catholic institutions, can offer society today is their uncompromising Catholicity. Catholic schools must aim "to create an atmosphere enlivened by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity striving to relate all human culture eventually to the news of salvation, so that the light of faith will illumine the knowledge which students gradually gain of the world, of life and of the human family" (cf. *Gravissimum Educationis*, 8). For this reason it is essential that your educational institutes maintain a strong Catholic identity. This calls for a curriculum marked by participation in prayer and the celebration of the Eucharist and requires that all teachers are well-versed not only in their fields of study but also in the Catholic faith. It is encouraging to note that so many of your Dioceses are trying to implement the recommendations of the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* by placing whenever possible trained priests, religious and counselors in every school. This will help to ensure that every department and activity joyfully exudes the spirit of Christ’s Church (cf. *Ecclesia in Asia*, 47).

4. The presence and influence of the priest in Catholic institutions is a time-proven way of fostering vocations. There are few things more attractive to young people who are considering a life of priestly or religious service than the example of a zealous priest who not only loves the priesthood but exercises his ministry with joy and dedication. Through a priest’s spiritual fatherhood the Holy Spirit invites many to follow ever closer in Christ’s footsteps: "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men" (Mt 4:19). In this regard, I am pleased to note your continued commitment to promoting more local vocations. Impressive are your many programmes for young people. Youth service groups and camps which specialize in catechesis, personality development, leadership training and vocational discernment are fertile ground for helping young men and women to determine God’s call in their lives (cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 9).

For those young men who have already made the decision to enter priestly formation, I offer special prayers. It is essential that these future ministers of the Church be given proper philosophical, theological and spiritual formation in order that they may understand in a realistic way the value of a life of poverty, chastity and obedience. More so than ever, priests are called to be signs of contradiction in societies which are daily becoming more secular and materialistic. "The lure of the so-called ‘consumer society’ is so strong among young people that they become totally dominated and imprisoned by an individualistic, materialist and hedonistic

interpretation of human existence" (cf. ibid., 8). This attitude can at times creep into the lives of our seminarians and priests, tempting them not to live "according to the logic of giving and generosity" (cf. ibid.). The Bishop has a special task to ensure that seminaries and houses of formation are staffed by priests who are exemplary in virtue and outstanding teachers of the Faith. As the Synod for Asia made clear "it is a difficult and delicate task that awaits them in the education of future priests. This is an apostolate second to none for the Church's well-being and vitality" (cf. *Ecclesia in Asia*, 43).

5. Preparing today's priests requires that seminarians be educated in the many different traditions of our Catholic faith. This is especially true in India which is fortunate to have Oriental and Latin Catholics in such close proximity. The numbers of Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Catholics present in your region challenges all the faithful to respect the needs and desires of those who celebrate the same Faith in different ways (cf. *Address to the Syro-Malabar Bishops of India,* 13 May 2003). "As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace" (1 Pt 4:10). This sharing can be accomplished by inter-ritual dialogue, education, joint projects and an experience of the different liturgical traditions of Catholicism. It is my hope that the Latin and Oriental Bishops will continue to work together in harmony with a shared spirit of love for Christ and his universal message of salvation. "As children of the one Church, reborn into the newness of life in Christ, believers are called to undertake all things in a spirit of common purpose, trust and unfailing charity" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 27).

This same commonality of purpose is important in the ongoing ecumenical dialogue with our separated brethren. All Catholics are responsible for fostering the work of Christian unity. Although the Eastern Churches are "directly involved in ecumenical dialogue with their sister Orthodox Churches" (cf. ibid.), Latin Rite Catholics must also take an active role in this exchange by participation in ecumenical discussions and activities. At all times, we must keep in mind that "dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some ways it is always an 'exchange of gifts'" (*Ut Unum Sint*, 28).

6. Dear Brother Bishops, as you return to your beloved land it is my hope that you will convey my warm greetings to the priests, religious and lay people of your Dioceses. The last year has been one of uncertainty, conflict and suffering for many in India. Remembering our Lord's commission to his disciples, I pray that as you leave this city of the Apostles Peter and Paul you will be filled with the Holy Spirit and prepared to act as instruments of reconciliation, stirring in the hearts of God's people a firm desire to work for lasting peace and justice in your country (cf. Jn 20:21-22).

With these sentiments I commend the Church in India to the loving intercession of our Blessed Lady, Queen of the Rosary, and I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of joy and hope in the Lord.

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