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

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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 degli Stati Uniti d'America (Regione IV), 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. To you, the Bishops of the ecclesiastical provinces of Baltimore and Washington, "beloved of God and called to holiness" (cf. *Rom* 1:7), I offer a cordial greeting in the Lord. May your pilgrimage to the tombs of Saints Peter and Paul, and this visit with the Successor of Peter, strengthen you in the Catholic faith which comes from the Apostles (cf. *Eucharistic Prayer I*) and in joyful witness to the grace of the Risen Christ!

This year, in my meetings with the various groups of Bishops from the United States making their visit *ad limina Apostolorum*, I wish to reflect on the mystery of the Church and, in particular, the exercise of the episcopal ministry. It is my hope that these reflections will serve as a point of departure for your own personal meditation and prayer, and thus contribute to a pastoral discernment helpful for the renewal and the building up of the Church in the United States.

Let us begin, then, with a consideration of the Bishop's *munus sanctificandi*, that is, the service to the holiness of Christ's Church which he is called to render as a herald of the Gospel, a steward of the mysteries of God (cf. *1 Cor* 4:1) and the spiritual father of the flock entrusted to his care.

2. The sanctifying mission of the Bishop finds its source in the indefectible holiness of the Church. Because "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her" (*Eph* 5:25-26), she has been endowed with unfailing holiness and has become herself, "in Christ and through Christ, the source and origin of all holiness" (*Lumen Gentium*, 47). This fundamental truth of the faith, reaffirmed in every recitation of the Creed,

needs to be more clearly understood and appreciated by all the members of Christ's Body, for it is an essential part of the Church's self-awareness and the basis of her universal mission.

The Church's belief in her own holiness is before all else a humble confession of God's merciful fidelity to his plan of salvation in Christ. Seen in this light, the holiness of the Church becomes a source of gratitude and joy for the completely unmerited gift of redemption and new life which we have received in Christ through the apostolic preaching and the sacraments of the new and eternal Covenant. Reborn in the Holy Spirit and made adoptive children of the Father in his beloved Son, we have become a kingdom of priests, a holy people (cf. *Ex* 19:6; *Rev* 5:10), called to offer ourselves "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (cf. *Rom* 12:1) in intercession for the whole human family.

At the same time, the holiness of the Church on earth remains real yet imperfect (*Lumen Gentium*, 8). Her holiness is both gift and call, a constitutive grace and a summons to constant fidelity to that grace. The Second Vatican Council, as the foundation of its program for the renewal of the Church's witness to Christ before the world, held out to all the baptized the high ideal of God's universal call to holiness. The Council reaffirmed that "all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity" (*Lumen Gentium*, 40) and it invited every member of the Church to an honest recognition of sin and the need for constant conversion along the path of penance and renewal.

The grandeur of faith's vision of the Church's unfailing holiness and the realistic acknowledgment of the sinfulness of her members should inspire in all a greater commitment to fidelity in the Christian life. In particular, it summons us, as Bishops, to a continuing discernment about the direction and goal of our activity as ministers of the grace of Christ. The challenge set before us and before the whole Church both by the Council and the Great Jubilee remains as valid as ever: the life of every Christian and all the structures of the Church must be clearly ordered to the pursuit of holiness.

3. The pursuit of personal holiness must be central to the life and identity of every Bishop. He is to recognize his own need to be sanctified as he engages in the sanctification of others. The Bishop himself is first and foremost a Christian – *vobiscum sum Christianus* (cf. Saint Augustine, *Sermo* 340.1) – called to the obedience of faith (cf. *Rom* 1:5), consecrated by baptism and given new life in the Holy Spirit. At the same time, thanks to the grace of his Ordination and the sacred character which it imprints, each Bishop stands in the place of Christ himself and acts in his person (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 21). Thus, he is called to progress along a specific path of holiness (*Pastores Gregis*, 13): the soul of his apostolate must be that pastoral charity which conforms his heart to the heart of Christ in a sacrificial love for the Church and all her members.

The most recent Synod of Bishops insisted that the objective sanctification which derives from ordination and the exercise of the episcopal ministry is to coincide with the subjective sanctification in which the Bishop, with the help of God's grace, must continuously progress (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, 11). Accordingly, the unifying principle of the Bishop's ministry will be his contemplation of the face of Christ and his proclamation of his Gospel of salvation: a dynamic interplay of prayer and work which will spiritually enrich both his outward activity and his interior life.

4. The Synod in fact challenged Bishops to become ever more attentive hearers of the word of God through daily prayer and the contemplative reading of Holy Scripture. Indeed, for the renewal of the Church in holiness, it is essential that the Bishop must not only be one who contemplates; he must also be a teacher of the way of contemplation (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, 17). His prayer should be nourished above all by the Eucharist: "not only when he stands before the People of God as *sacerdos et pontifex*, but also by spending a fair amount of his time in adoration before the tabernacle" (*ibid.*, 16). For his prayer to find its culmination and fulfillment in the Eucharist, it must also be nourished by regular recourse to the sacrament of Penance and, in a special way, by the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours. His whole life of prayer, whether personal or liturgical, will thus become a source of apostolic fruitfulness, since it is presented to the Father in the Holy Spirit as intercession for the entire Body of Christ.

For this reason, the Bishop will surely cultivate an ecclesial spirituality, "since everything in his life is directed to

building up the Church in love" (*Pastores Gregis*, 11). At the very beginning of the recent Synod of Bishops, I wished to link this attitude of service to the ecclesial community to the adoption of a lifestyle which imitates the poverty of Christ, and I invited the Bishops to "verify to what extent a personal and community conversion to an effective evangelical poverty has taken place in the Church" (*Opening Homily*, 30 September 2001, 3). At this time I encourage you and your brother Bishops to undertake such a discernment with regard to the practical exercise of the episcopal ministry in your country, in order to ensure that it will be seen ever more clearly as a form of sacrificial service in the midst of Christ's flock. This will surely bear abundant fruit by providing greater inner freedom in the exercise of the ministry, a more evangelical witness to Jesus Christ, "who carried out the work of redemption in poverty and oppression" (*Lumen Gentium*, 8), and a greater solidarity with the struggles and sufferings of the poor.

5. I am deeply convinced that, in a Church constantly called to interior renewal and prophetic witness, the exercise of episcopal authority must be built upon the testimony of personal holiness. The great challenge of the new evangelization to which the Church is called in our time requires a credibility born of personal fidelity to the Gospel and the demands of Christian discipleship. In the memorable words of Pope Paul VI, "it is primarily by her conduct and her life that the Church will evangelize the world, namely, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus – the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, by the witness of her holiness" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41).

As we ponder in faith God's plan for a human family reconciled and made one in Christ, of which the Church is the sacrament and prophetic foreshadowing, we can see ever more clearly the inseparable relationship between holiness and the Church's mission (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 90). An essential part of the new evangelization must therefore be a new zeal for holiness, which inspires all our initiatives and finds practical expression in a renewal of faith and Christian life. Let us not neglect the prophetic summons addressed to the whole Church through the experience of the Great Jubilee: the Church is called to offer a genuine "training in holiness" adapted to the needs of all and to ensure that every Christian community becomes a genuine school of prayer and personal sanctification (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 33).

6. This, then, is the great challenge facing the Church at the dawn of the new millennium and the sure path to her authentic interior renewal. As the Catholic community in the United States strives under your leadership to take up this challenge, I assure you of my prayers that you and all the clergy, religious and lay faithful entrusted to your pastoral care will grow daily in holiness and become an authentic leaven of the Gospel in American society.

Dear Brothers, in your efforts to carry out your demanding ministry of sanctification in the Church in America, you are blessed to have an outstanding model of episcopal sanctity in Saint John Neumann, whose life was spent in generous and unassuming service to his flock. Inspired by his example and guided by his prayers, may you grow daily in the grace of your ministry, so that you may ever fulfill the perfect duty of pastoral love (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 41). Commending all of you to his intercession, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of joy and peace in the Lord.

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