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

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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 degli Stati Uniti d'America (Regione VI), 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 is with great joy that I greet you, the Bishops of the ecclesiastical provinces of Detroit and Cincinnati, on the occasion of your visit *ad limina Apostolorum*. Through you I greet the priests, deacons, religious and lay faithful of your Dioceses: may the grace and peace of the Risen Lord be with all of you, "consecrated in Christ Jesus and called to be a holy people" (*1 Cor 1:2*)!

In my meetings with the Bishops of the United States this year I have sought to offer some personal reflections on the episcopal ministry of sanctifying, teaching and governing the People of God. In the present reflection I wish to continue our consideration of the *munus sanctificandi* in the light of the Bishop's responsibility for building up the communion of all the baptized in holiness, fidelity to the Gospel and zeal for the spread of God's Kingdom.

2. Like her holiness, the Church's unity is an un failing gift of God and a constant summons to an ever more perfect communion in faith, hope and love. "God himself is communion, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and he calls all people to share in that same Trinitarian communion" (*Ecclesia in America*, 33). Through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the gift of the Risen Christ, the Church has been established as "a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (*Lumen Gentium*, 4). As the sign and sacrament of that unity which is the calling and destiny of the whole human family, the Church lives and carries out her saving mission as "one body" (cf. *1 Cor 12:12ff.*), which the Holy Spirit guides in the way of all truth, brings together in communion and in the works of ministry, directs through the variety of hierarchical and charismatic gifts, and

adorns with his fruits (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 4). This mystery of unity in diversity is especially evident in the Bishop's celebration of the Eucharist, when he is surrounded by the presbyterate, ministers, religious and the whole People of God (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 41); in the Eucharist, that "holy communion" which is the very soul of the Church is both expressed and brought about (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 3).

This close relationship between the Church's holiness and her unity is the basis for that spirituality of communion and mission which I am convinced we must foster at the dawn of this new millennium, "if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43). The Bishop, as the icon of Christ the Good Shepherd, present in the midst of his holy people, has the primary duty of promoting and encouraging such a spirituality (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, 22). The Second Vatican Council, while insisting that the building up of Christ's body takes place in a rich diversity of members, functions and gifts, also noted that "among these gifts, the primacy belongs to the grace of the apostles" (*Lumen Gentium*, 7), whose successors are called to discern and coordinate the charisms and ministries given for the building up of the Church in that work of sanctifying humanity and giving glory to God which is the goal of all her life and activity (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10).

3. This spirituality of communion, which Bishops are called personally to exemplify, will naturally lead to "a pastoral style which is ever more open to collaboration with all" (*Pastores Gregis*, 44). It demands of you, in the first place, an ever closer relationship with your priests, who through sacramental ordination are sharers with you in the one priesthood of Christ and in the one apostolic mission entrusted to his Church (cf. *Christus Dominus*, 11). Through Holy Orders, Bishops and priests alike have been entrusted with a ministerial priesthood which differs from the common priesthood of all the baptized "in essence and not only in degree" (*Lumen Gentium*, 10). At the same time, within the communion of the Body of Christ you and your priests are called to cooperate in enabling the whole People of God to carry out the royal priesthood conferred by Baptism.

Precisely because the members of his presbyterate are his closest cooperators in the ordained ministry, each Bishop should constantly strive to relate to them "as a father and brother who loves them, listens to them, welcomes them, corrects them, supports them, seeks their cooperation and, as much as possible, is concerned for their human, spiritual, ministerial and financial well-being" (*Pastores Gregis*, 47). Just as the Apostle Paul recommended Timothy to the Christian community at Thessalonica, so Bishops should be able to present each of their priests to individual parish communities, saying: "He is our brother and God's fellow worker in preaching the Gospel of Christ, and so we sent him to strengthen and encourage you in regard to your faith" (*1 Thes* 3:2). As a spiritual father and brother to his priests, the Bishop should do everything in his power to encourage them in fidelity to their vocation and to the demands of leading a life worthy of the calling they have received (cf. *Eph* 4:1).

Here I want to offer a word of acknowledgment and praise for the dedication and faithful work carried out by so many committed priests in the United States, especially those engaged in meeting the daily challenges and demands associated with parish ministry. I invite you, their Bishops, to join me in thanking them and acknowledging with gratitude their untiring commitment as "pastors, preachers of the Gospel and agents of ecclesial communion" (*Ecclesia in America*, 39).

4. Strengthening a spirituality of communion and mission will demand a constant effort to renew the bonds of fraternal unity within the presbyterate. This calls for a conscious reappropriation of and daily recommitment to the things we share as the very basis of our identity as priests: the pursuit of holiness, the practice of heartfelt intercessory prayer, a ministerial spirituality nourished by the word of God and celebration of the sacraments, the daily exercise of pastoral charity, and the life of celibate chastity as the expression of a radical commitment to follow Christ. As the spiritual values which unite priests, these should be the basis for the renewal of the priestly ministry and the promotion of unity in the apostolate, so that, under the guidance of its priests the community of disciples may truly be "of one heart and one mind" (*Acts* 4:32).

A spirituality of communion will naturally bear fruit in the development of a diocesan spirituality grounded in the particular gifts and charisms bestowed by the Holy Spirit for the upbuilding of each local Church. Every priest should find "precisely in his belonging to and dedication to the particular Church a wealth of meaning, criteria for

discernment and action which shape both his pastoral mission and his spiritual life" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 31). At the same time, an authentic "diocesan spirit" will also inspire and motivate the whole Christian community to a greater sense of responsibility for the fruitful carrying out of the Church's mission through its rich network of communities, institutions and apostolates (cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 10).

5. It is in major and minor seminaries that the seeds of a spirituality of communion and mission, and of a healthy priesthood are sown. I encourage you to make frequent visits to the seminary, in order to know personally those who may one day be priests in your local Churches. Such direct contacts will also help to "ensure that the seminaries form mature and balanced personalities, men capable of establishing sound human and pastoral relationships, knowledgeable in theology, solid in the spiritual life, and in love with the Church" (*Pastores Gregis*, 48). The challenges of ecclesial life increasingly call for the priest to be, in every sense, a "man of communion" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 43), committed to an effective cooperation with others in the service of the ecclesial community.

Proper formation in chastity and celibacy remains an essential component of seminary training, together with the presentation of a solid and correct theological understanding of the Church and the priesthood, including a clear and precise identification of those positions which are not compatible with the Church's authoritative self-understanding as expressed by the Council and the documents of the post-conciliar renewal. This is a personal responsibility that falls to you as Pastors concerned for the future of your local Churches, and one that cannot be delegated. Since priestly formation does not end with ordination, your ministry of sanctification must also include care for the ongoing spiritual life of your priests and the effectiveness of their ministry. This calls for a continuing personal formation aimed at deepening and harmonizing the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral aspects of their priestly life (cf. *Directory on the Life and Ministry of Priests*, 70). In this way they will grow ever more fully into "men of the Church", imbued with a truly catholic spirit and authentic missionary zeal.

I am personally convinced that prayer is the primary force that inspires and forms priestly vocations. As I wrote in my Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Gregis*, "Vocations need a vast network of people who pray fervently to 'the Lord of the harvest'. The more the problem of vocations is confronted in the context of prayer, the more prayer will help those whom God has called to hear his voice" (No. 48).

6. Dear Brothers, our reflections today have highlighted the connection between the *munus sanctificandi* and the spirituality of communion and mission. In the daily exercise of your episcopal ministry may you be builders of communion in personal dialogue and personal encounter with your priests, deacons, men and women religious and the lay faithful of your local Churches. This is the sure path that will enable them to grow in that holiness which is "the hidden source and the infallible measure of the Church's apostolic activity and missionary zeal" (*Christifideles Laici*, 17).

With gratitude for the tremendous gift and mystery that has been entrusted to us in the sacred ministry, I express my steadfast solidarity with you and your brother priests. To you and all the faithful entrusted to your pastoral care I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of joy and peace in the Risen Savior.

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