

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 0200

Giovedì 07.04.2011

VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEGLI ECC.MI PRESULI DELLA CHIESA SIRO-MALABARESE DELL'INDIA

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Alle ore 12 di questa mattina, nella Sala del Concistoro del Palazzo Apostolico Vaticano, il Santo Padre Benedetto XVI incontra il gruppo di Vescovi della Chiesa Siro-Malabarese dell'India, ricevuti in questi giorni, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum".

Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che il Papa rivolge loro:

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

I offer you a warm fraternal welcome on the occasion of your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum* a moment which is now sadly marked by the death of Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil. Before you all, I wish again to give thanks to God for his able and willing service over many years to the whole of the Church in India. May our loving Saviour welcome his noble soul into paradise, and may he rest in peace in communion with all the saints.

Thank you for the sentiments of respect and esteem offered by Mar Bosco Puthur on your behalf and in the name of those whom you shepherd. Your presence is an eloquent expression of the deep spiritual bonds which unite the Syro-Malabar Church to the Church universal, in fidelity to Christ's prayer for all his disciples (cf. *Jn* 17:21). You bring to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul the joys and hopes of the entire Syro-Malabar Church, which my predecessor the Venerable John Paul II happily raised to the status of a Major-Archiepiscopal Church in 1992. My greetings go to the priests, the women and men religious, the members of the lay movements, the families and in particular the young people who are the hope of the Church.

The Second Vatican Council taught that "Bishops have been designated by the Holy Spirit to take the place of the Apostles as pastors of souls and, together with the Supreme Pontiff and subject to his authority, they are commissioned to perpetuate the work of Christ, the eternal Pastor" (*Christus Dominus*, 1). Today's encounter thus forms an essential part of your pilgrimage *ad Limina Apostolorum*; it is also an occasion to intensify the

awareness of the divine gift and responsibility received in the ordination by which you became members of the College of Bishops. I join you in seeking the intercession of the Apostles for your ministry. They, who were the first to receive the charge of caring for Christ's flock, continue to guide and watch over the Church from their place in heaven and remain a model and inspiration to all Bishops by their holiness of life, teaching and example.

Your visit also provides a precious opportunity to give thanks to God for the gift of communion in the apostolic faith and in the life of the Spirit which unites you among yourselves and with your people. With divine inspiration and grace on the one hand, and with humble prayers and efforts on the other, this precious gift of fellowship with the Triune God and with one another will grow ever richer and deeper. Each Bishop, for his part, is called to be a minister of unity (cf. *ibid.*, 6) in his particular church and within the universal Church. This responsibility is of special importance in a country like India where the unity of the Church is reflected in the rich diversity of her rites and traditions. I encourage you to do all you can to continue to foster the communion between yourselves and all Catholic Bishops throughout the world, and to be the living expression of that fellowship among your priests and faithful. Let the gentle command of Saint Paul continue to guide your hearts and your apostolic endeavours: "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honour. Live in harmony with one another" (*Rom 12:9-10,16*). Thus will the unity of the Triune God be proclaimed and lived in the world, and thus will our new life in Christ be experienced always more profoundly, to the benefit of the entire Catholic Church.

Within this mystery of loving communion, a privileged expression of sharing in the divine life is through sacramental marriage and family life. The rapid and dramatic changes which are a part of contemporary society throughout the world bring with them not only serious challenges, but new possibilities to proclaim the liberating truth of the Gospel message to transform and elevate all human relationships. Your support, dear Brother Bishops, and that of your priests and communities for the sound and integral education of young people in the ways of chastity and responsibility will not only enable them to embrace the true nature of marriage, but will also benefit Indian culture as a whole. Unfortunately, the Church can no longer count on the support of society at large to promote the Christian understanding of marriage as a permanent and indissoluble union ordered to procreation and the sanctification of the spouses. Have your families look to the Lord and his saving word for a complete and truly positive vision of life and marital relations, so necessary for the good of the whole human family. Let your preaching and catechesis in this field be patient and constant.

At the heart of many of the works of education and charity exercised in your Eparchies are the various communities of men and women religious who devote themselves to the service of God and their neighbour. I wish to express the Church's appreciation for the charity, faith and hard work of these religious, who by professing and living the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience offer an example of complete devotion to the divine Master and thus help considerably to equip your faithful for every good work (cf. *2 Tim 3:17*). The vocation to religious life and the pursuit of perfect charity is attractive in every age, but it should be nourished by a constant spiritual renewal which is to be fostered by superiors who devote great care to the human, intellectual and spiritual formation of their fellow religious (cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 11). The Church insists that preparation for religious profession is to be marked by long and careful discernment with the goal of ensuring, before final vows are made, that each candidate is firmly rooted in Christ, solid in his or her capacity for genuine commitment and joyful in the gift of self to Jesus Christ and his Church. Furthermore, by its nature, formation is never completed, but is ongoing and must be an integral part of the daily life of each individual and community. Much needs to be done in this area, utilizing the many resources available in your Church, above all through deeper training in the practice of prayer, the particular spiritual and liturgical traditions of the Syro-Malabar rite, and the intellectual demands of a solid pastoral practice. I encourage you, in close collaboration with religious superiors, to plan effectively for such a solid ongoing formation, so that religious men and women continue to be powerful witnesses to the presence of God in the world and to our eternal destiny, so that the complete gift of self to God through religious life may shine with all its beauty and purity before men.

With these thoughts, dear Brother Bishops, I once again express my fraternal affection and esteem. Commending you to the intercession of Saint Thomas, Apostle of India, I assure you of my prayers for you and for those entrusted to your pastoral care. To all I impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of grace and peace in the Lord.

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