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◆ VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEGLI ECC.MI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA DEI VESCOVI CATTOLICI DEGLI STATI UNITI D'AMERICA (REGIONI XIV-XV)

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Alle ore 12 di questa mattina, a conclusione della serie di Visite quinquennali "*ad Limina Apostolorum*" dei Vescovi Cattolici degli Stati Uniti d'America, il Santo Padre Benedetto XVI incontra un gruppo di Presuli, che sta ricevendo in questo mese in separate udienze, delle Regioni XIV e XV, tra i quali i Vescovi dei diversi Riti orientali.

Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che il Papa rivolge ai Vescovi presenti:

● DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

I greet all of you with fraternal affection in the Lord. Our meeting today concludes the series of quinquennial visits of the Bishops of the United States of America *ad limina Apostolorum*. As you know, over these past six months I have wished to reflect with you and your Brother Bishops on a number of pressing spiritual and cultural challenges facing the Church in your country as it takes up the task of the new evangelization.

I am particularly pleased that this, our final meeting, takes place in the presence of the Bishops of the various Eastern Churches present in the United States, since you and your faithful embody in a unique way the ethnic, cultural and spiritual richness of the American Catholic community, past and present. Historically, the Church in America has struggled to recognize and incorporate this diversity, and has succeeded, not without difficulty, in

forging a communion in Christ and in the apostolic faith which mirrors the catholicity which is an indefectible mark of the Church. In this communion, which finds its source and model in the mystery of the Triune God (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 4), unity and diversity are constantly reconciled and enhanced, as a sign and sacrament of the ultimate vocation and destiny of the entire human family.

Throughout our meetings, you and your Brother Bishops have spoken insistently of the importance of preserving, fostering and advancing this gift of Catholic unity as an essential condition for the fulfillment of the Church's mission in your country. In this concluding talk, I would like simply to touch on two specific points which have recurred in our discussions and which, with you, I consider crucial for the exercise of your ministry of guiding Christ's flock forward amid the difficulties and opportunities of the present moment.

I would begin by praising your unremitting efforts, in the best traditions of the Church in America, to respond to the ongoing phenomenon of immigration in your country. The Catholic community in the United States continues, with great generosity, to welcome waves of new immigrants, to provide them with pastoral care and charitable assistance, and to support ways of regularizing their situation, especially with regard to the unification of families. A particular sign of this is the long-standing commitment of the American Bishops to immigration reform. This is clearly a difficult and complex issue from the civil and political, as well as the social and economic, but above all from the human point of view. It is thus of profound concern to the Church, since it involves ensuring the just treatment and the defense of the human dignity of immigrants.

In our day too, the Church in America is called to embrace, incorporate and cultivate the rich patrimony of faith and culture present in America's many immigrant groups, including not only those of your own rites, but also the swelling numbers of Hispanic, Asian and African Catholics. The demanding pastoral task of fostering a communion of cultures within your local Churches must be considered of particular importance in the exercise of your ministry at the service of unity (cf. *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops*, 63). This diaconia of communion entails more than simply respecting linguistic diversity, promoting sound traditions, and providing much-needed social programs and services. It also calls for a commitment to ongoing preaching, catechesis and pastoral activity aimed at inspiring in all the faithful a deeper sense of their communion in the apostolic faith and their responsibility for the Church's mission in the United States. Nor can the significance of this challenge be underestimated: the immense promise and the vibrant energies of a new generation of Catholics are waiting to be tapped for the renewal of the Church's life and the rebuilding of the fabric of American society.

This commitment to fostering Catholic unity is necessary not only for meeting the positive challenges of the new evangelization but also countering the forces of disgregation within the Church which increasingly represent a grave obstacle to her mission in the United States. I appreciate the efforts being made to encourage the faithful, individually and in the variety of ecclesial associations, to move forward together, speaking with one voice in addressing the urgent problems of the present moment. Here I would repeat the heartfelt plea that I made to America's Catholics during my Pastoral Visit: "We can only move forward if we turn our gaze together to Christ" and thus embrace "that true spiritual renewal desired by the Council, a renewal which can only strengthen the Church in that holiness and unity indispensable for the effective proclamation of the Gospel in today's world" (*Homily in Saint Patrick's Cathedral*, New York, 19 April 2008).

In our conversations, many of you have spoken of your concern to build ever stronger relationships of friendship, cooperation and trust with your priests. At the present time, too, I urge you to remain particularly close to the men and women in your local Churches who are committed to following Christ ever more perfectly by generously embracing the evangelical counsels. I wish to reaffirm my deep gratitude for the example of fidelity and self-sacrifice given by many consecrated women in your country, and to join them in praying that this moment of discernment will bear abundant spiritual fruit for the revitalization and strengthening of their communities in fidelity to Christ and the Church, as well as to their founding charisms. The urgent need in our own time for credible and attractive witnesses to the redemptive and transformative power of the Gospel makes it essential to recapture a sense of the sublime dignity and beauty of the consecrated life, to pray for religious vocations and to promote them actively, while strengthening existing channels for communication and cooperation, especially through the work of the Vicar or Delegate for Religious in each Diocese.

Dear Brother Bishops, it is my hope that the Year of Faith which will open on 12 October this year, the fiftieth anniversary of the convening of the Second Vatican Council, will awaken a desire on the part of the entire Catholic community in America to reappropriate with joy and gratitude the priceless treasure of our faith. With the progressive weakening of traditional Christian values, and the threat of a season in which our fidelity to the Gospel may cost us dearly, the truth of Christ needs not only to be understood, articulated and defended, but to be proposed joyfully and confidently as the key to authentic human fulfillment and to the welfare of society as a whole.

Now, at the conclusion of these meetings, I willingly join all of you in thanking Almighty God for the signs of new vitality and hope with which he has blessed the Church in the United States of America. At the same time I ask him to confirm you and your Brother Bishops in your delicate mission of guiding the Catholic community in your country in the ways of unity, truth and charity as it faces the challenges of the future. In the words of the ancient prayer, let us ask the Lord to direct our hearts and those of our people, that the flock may never fail in obedience to its shepherds, nor the shepherds in the care of the flock (cf. *Sacramentarium Veronense*, Missa de natale Episcoporum). With great affection I commend you, and the clergy, religious and lay faithful entrusted to your pastoral care, to the loving intercession of Mary Immaculate, Patroness of the United States, and I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of joy and peace in the Lord.

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