



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE BISHOPS OF SLOVAKIA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Friday, 15 June 2007

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

I meet you with great joy on the occasion of the *ad limina* visit that you are making in these days. I address to each one of you my cordial greeting and willingly extend it to your respective diocesan Communities.

Through you, I would like to convey my greeting to all the Slovak People, evangelized by Sts Cyril and Methodius, who in the last century were obliged to undergo deep suffering and persecution by the totalitarian Communist regime.

I am pleased to recall that among the Bishops, priests, Religious and lay people who bore a heroic witness in those comparatively recent years is also Cardinal Ján Chryzostom Korec, to whom I ask you to convey my fraternal embrace.

John Paul II had close ties with your beloved Nation. On his third Pastoral Visit to Slovakia, in September 2003, he chose as his motto: "*Faithful to Christ, faithful to the Church*". This motto continues to be an authentic apostolic and missionary programme, not only for the Church in Slovakia but for all the People of God, subjected as they are, especially in Europe, to an insistent ideological pressure that would like to reduce Christianity to a merely "private" dimension.

In fact, from the religious and cultural viewpoints, Slovakia is entering ever more deeply into the typical dynamic of other European countries with an ancient Christian tradition, heavily marked in our time by a widespread process of secularization.

Today, after emerging from the tunnel of persecution, the Christian communities which have

preserved their ancient and deeply-rooted Catholic religious practices find themselves following the path of renewal that was promoted by the Second Vatican Council.

They are rightly concerned to preserve their own precious spiritual patrimony and at the same time to update it; and they are striving to remain faithful to their roots and to share their experiences with the other Churches in Europe, in a fraternal "exchange of gifts" that tends to enrich all.

Slovakia and Poland, the two Countries in Eastern Europe which have inherited the greatest riches of Catholic tradition, are currently exposed to the risk of seeing this patrimony, which the Communist regime did not manage to destroy, under heavy attack by the characteristic trends of Western societies: consumerism, hedonism, secularism, relativism, etc.

In the past few days I have heard your reports and learned, for example, that many rural parishes - those which have best preserved the Christian culture and spirituality - are seeing their population dwindling as people go in search of greater well-being and more profitable employment in the larger cities where they stay.

Dear and venerable Brothers, this is the situation in which the Lord calls you to carry out your episcopal ministry. I know that precisely in order to respond to the changed pastoral requirements, you have for some time been involved in drafting the *Plan for Pastoral Care and Evangelization* of the Catholic Church in Slovakia for the years 2007-13, which will be approved next October.

With a view to 2013, the year when you will commemorate the 1,150th anniversary of the beginning of the mission in your Region of Sts Cyril and Methodius, you have therefore decided to revive and bring up to date the evangelizing action of the two Brother Saints from Thessalonica. And you have started on this unanimous missionary mobilization with the rediscovery of tradition and of the strong and deep roots of Christianity in your people.

This pastoral undertaking intends to embrace all the social milieus and to respond to the expectations of the Slovak People, paying special attention to the spiritual requirements of young people and families. This is why you pay special attention to the *youth apostolate* in the contexts of both school and parish.

Experience tells you that a good quality training in the scholastic environment is particularly useful for the future of the new generations and in this regard, Catholic schools, numerous in Slovakia, make a precious contribution. Starting with nursery schools and extending to secondary classes, they endeavour to assure students a high-quality instruction and, at the same time, an integral spiritual, moral and human education.

With regard to the pastoral care of youth in the parishes, I know that you are able to rely on the ministry of numerous young priests to offer to boys and girls, in addition to the proper preparation

for the Sacraments of Christian Initiation, a true and proper process of spiritual and community growth.

I warmly recommend that every decision always be incorporated in organized programmes of formation so as to teach young people always to connect faith with life. Only in this way, in fact, will you be able to help them forge a Christian conscience capable of resisting the enticements of consumerism, which are ever more insidious and invasive.

With regard to the reality of *families*, I have learned that Slovakia too is beginning to be affected by the crisis of marriage and the birth rate. This is first and foremost due to financial considerations which induce young engaged couples to postpone their marriage.

In addition, the dwindling social esteem of the value of marriage is being recorded, combined with a weakness in the new generations who are often afraid to make permanent decisions and lifelong commitments.

Another destabilizing factor is undoubtedly the systematic attack on marriage and the family conducted by certain areas of culture and by the mass media. In this framework, what should the Church do other than intensify prayer and continue to be strongly committed to supporting families as they face the challenges of the present time?

Thanks be to God, the pastoral care in your Country of the sacraments connected with the family, is well structured: Marriage, the Baptism of children, First Communion and Confirmation have obligatory preparation periods, and it is a constant commitment for you as Pastors and for the priests who assist you to help families start out on an authentic journey of faith and of Christian life as a community.

The groups, movements and lay ecclesial associations involved on the front line in the promotion of conjugal and family life and in the dissemination of the Church's teaching on matrimony, the family, sexual morals and bioethical themes, can be an effective source of help in your pastoral action.

At the crossroads between the pastoral care of the family and that of young people is the *pastoral care of vocations*.

Slovakia is a Nation which subsequent to 1990 experienced a vigorous flourishing of vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life.

In addition to the only seminary that stayed open under the dictatorship, five others have come into being in these years, and today almost all parishes are provided with their own pastor.

We thank the Lord for this wealth of priests, and especially of young priests. However, as was foreseeable, this springtime could not last long, so today every Christian community is encouraged to give priority to a careful pastoral vocations promotion.

The formation of altar servers is a good step in this direction. Many parishes are taking it, in collaboration with the seminaries.

Of course, the increase in the number and quality of vocations also depends on the spiritual life of families: working for and with families is therefore a particularly appropriate way to encourage the birth and consolidation of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life.

Nor should it be forgotten that this must all be nourished by constant and intense prayer.

Dear and venerable Brothers, continue to foster fatherly and open relations with your priests; seek to share the burden of their difficulties, support them and be concerned with their spiritual formation, organizing suitable pastoral meetings, retreats and spiritual exercises for them.

I rejoice because in accordance with the directives of the Second Vatican Council, every single one of your Dioceses has worked out a formation plan that provides for wise collaboration between elderly and young priests in order to meet the different needs of each one.

Take my cordial greeting back to your first collaborators, and assure them of my remembrance in prayer.

Then please convey my spiritual affection to all the faithful entrusted to your pastoral care, especially the sick and those in greatest need. Upon each one I invoke the heavenly protection of Our Lady of Sorrows, Patroness of Slovakia.

With these sentiments, I cordially impart to you, dear Confreres, a special Apostolic Blessing, which I gladly extend to the faithful of your Christian Communities and to all the inhabitants of your beloved Country.