



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO MEMBERS OF THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF PUERTO RICO
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 30 June 2007

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

I receive you with great joy, Pastors of God's pilgrim Church in Puerto Rico, who have come to Rome on your *ad limina* visit to strengthen the deep bonds that unite you with this Apostolic See. Through each one of you, I send my cordial greeting and express my affection and esteem to the priests, religious communities and lay faithful of your respective particular Churches.

I am grateful for the friendly words which Archbishop Roberto Octavio González Nieves of San Juan de Puerto Rico, President of your Bishops' Conference, has expressed to me on behalf of all. He has explained the anxieties and hopes of your pastoral ministry, which aims to guide the People of God on the path of salvation by strongly proclaiming the Catholic faith for a better formation of the faithful.

The quinquennial reports demonstrate your anxiety about the challenges and problems which must be confronted at this time in history. Indeed, in recent years many things have changed in the social, economic and also religious contexts. These changes have sometimes led to religious indifference and a certain moral relativism which influence religious practice and indirectly affect the structures of society itself.

This religious situation calls you into question as Pastors. In addition, it requires that you remain united to make the Lord's presence more tangible among men and women through joint pastoral projects that respond better to the new reality.

It is fundamental to preserve and increase the gift of unity which Jesus implored from the Father for his disciples (cf. Jn 17: 11). You are called to live and to bear witness to Christ's desire for his

Church's unity in your respective dioceses.

Moreover, far from threatening this unity, the possible differences in local customs and traditions can contribute to enriching the common faith. And, as successors of the Apostles, you must be eager to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4: 3).

Therefore, I would like to recall that all, especially Bishops and priests, are called to an inalienable mission which strongly binds you to ensuring that the Church is a place where the mystery of divine love is taught and lived. Only an authentic spirituality of communion, visibly expressed in mutual collaboration and fraternal life, will make this possible.

Priests constitute a sector that demands your prime pastoral attention. They are in the front line of evangelization and are especially in need of your care and personal closeness. Your relationship with them must not be merely institutional. Rather, as your true sons, friends and brothers, it should be inspired above all by love (cf. I Pt 4: 8) as an expression of episcopal fatherhood. This must be expressed in a special way to priests who are sick or elderly, as well as to those who are in difficult circumstances.

Priests, for their part, must remember that they are first and foremost men of God. Thus, they must nurture their own spiritual life and their continuing formation.

All their ministerial work "*must begin effectively with prayer*", as St Albert the Great said (*Commentary on Dionysius' Mystical Theology*, 15). Every priest must find in this encounter with God the strength to exercise his ministry with greater devotion and dedication, setting an example of availability and detachment from all that is superfluous.

In thinking of future candidates to the priesthood and consecrated life, it is necessary to highlight the importance of ceaseless prayer to the Lord of the Harvest (cf. Mt 9: 38), so that he will give many and holy vocations to the Church in Puerto Rico, especially in the present situation in which young people often find it difficult to respond to the Lord's call to the priestly or consecrated life.

Therefore, you should develop a specific vocations apostolate which will encourage those in charge of the pastoral care of youth to be daring mediators of the Lord's call.

Above all, you should not be afraid to suggest his call to young men and subsequently accompany them with assiduous care in both the human and spiritual environments, so that they may ever more clearly discern their vocational decision.

With regard to the formation of candidates to the priesthood, the Bishop must take the greatest pains to choose the most suitable and best qualified educators for this role.

Given the concrete circumstances and number of vocations in Puerto Rico, it might be possible to consider joining forces and pooling resources in a common agreement and with a spirit of unity in pastoral planning in order to obtain better and more satisfactory results. This would allow for a better choice of formation teachers and professors to help each seminarian to grow with a "mature and balanced personality... solid in the spiritual life, and in love with the Church" (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, n. 48).

In this delicate task, all priests must feel co-responsible, promoting new vocations above all by their own example and without failing to support those that have developed in their own parish community or in some movement.

A mindset inspired by secularism is spreading in society in a more or less known form and is gradually leading to contempt or ignorance of all that is sacred, relegating faith to the merely private sphere. A correct concept of religious freedom is incompatible with this ideology, which is sometimes presented as the only rational voice.

The family is also a permanent challenge for you. It is threatened on all sides by the snares of the modern world such as the prevalent materialism, the search for instant pleasure and the lack of steadfast fidelity by couples who are constantly influenced by the media.

When marriage is not built on the rock of true love and mutual self-giving, it is easily swept away by the current of divorce and also looks askance at the value of life, especially that of unborn children.

This panorama reveals the need to intensify, as you are already doing, an effective family apostolate which helps Christian spouses to assume the fundamental values of the Sacrament they have received.

In this regard, faithful to Christ's teaching, through your magisterium you proclaim the truth about the family as a domestic Church and sanctuary of life in the face of certain trends in contemporary society that seek to eclipse or to confuse the one, irreplaceable value of marriage between a man and a woman.

The above-mentioned religious indifferentism and the easy temptation of lax morals, as well as the ignorance of the Christian tradition with its rich spiritual patrimony, exert a powerful influence on the new generations. Young people have the right, from the beginning of the process of their formation, to be educated in faith and sound morals. For this reason, the integral education of the youngest cannot omit religious teaching at school as well. A solid religious formation will also serve as an effective shield against the advance of sects or other religious groups widespread today.

The Catholic faithful, who are called to administer temporal realities to order them in accordance

with the divine will, must bear a courageous witness to their faith in the different spheres of public life. Their participation in ecclesial life, moreover, is fundamental, and without their collaboration your apostolate as Pastors would sometimes not reach "all men, of every epoch and all over the earth" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 33).

On this topic, I would like to recall some important words spoken by my Predecessor, John Paul II, during his Pastoral Visit to Puerto Rico: "In the course of your ministry you will sometimes be faced with issues which involve specific choices of a political nature. In such situations you must be constant in proclaiming the moral principles which govern every field of human activity. But lay people with morally upright consciences are those best qualified for the ordering of temporal matters according to God's plan. Leave such matters to them. Your task is to foster communion and brotherhood; not to provoke discord in regard to matters where the faithful may legitimately choose between different courses of action" (*Address to Clergy and Religious of Puerto Rico*, 12 October 1984; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 26 November, p. 11, n. 3).

Some sectors of your society have all they need in abundance while others suffer serious shortages which often verge on poverty. In this context, the generosity of Puerto Ricans, who respond with solidarity to the cries for help in certain tragedies in the world, is well known. It is to be hoped in this regard that this same generosity, coordinated by the services of the Puerto Rican *Caritas*, will also be forthcoming in those circumstances when local groups, individuals or families stand in need of real assistance.

Dear Brothers: in Puerto Rico evangelization and the practice of the faith have always gone hand in hand with filial love for the Virgin Mary. This is demonstrated by the churches, shrines and monuments, and also the devotional practices and popular celebrations in honour of the Mother of God. To her I entrust your intentions and your pastoral work.

I place under her motherly protection all the priests, religious communities, families, young people, sick and especially the most deprived. Please take back to everyone the Pope's greeting and deep affection, together with his Apostolic Blessing.