



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF CANADA ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

Friday, 17 November 1978

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

IT IS A RICH source of pastoral strength to assemble together in the name of Jesus and in the unity of his Church. For me personally, it is a real joy to welcome you as Brothers in the Episcopate, partners in the Gospel, pastors of a great section of the People of God in Canada. Your Dioceses are immensely important for the universal Church, and for me, whom the inscrutable design of God has now placed in the See of Peter to be the Servant of all.

According to the Second Vatican Council the very notion of a Diocese is "a portion of God's people entrusted to a Bishop to be guided by him with the assistance of his clergy, so that, loyal to its pastor and formed by him into one community in the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and the Eucharist, it constitutes one particular Church in which the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and active". This is the mystery of God's love that we are reflecting on today: the Bishop as pastor of a particular Church in which Catholic unity abides.

This unity is effected and ensured by the Gospel and the Eucharist. Indeed the Council reminds us: " Among the principal duties of Bishops, the preaching of the Gospel occupies an eminent place". The Bishop finds his identity in evangelizing, in being a herald of that Gospel which Saint Paul assures us is "the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith". At the highest level of our ministry of evangelization is the Eucharist, which we faithfully acknowledge with the Council as "the source and summit of all evangelization ".

From God's word and its supreme enactment in the Eucharist we draw gladness and strength in order to be father and brother and friend to our priests, who have the vital task of collaborating with us in communicating the mystery of Christ. May the joy that the Gospel generates in our own lives be contagious for the ministry of our priests, and help them to realize how much Christ needs them in his mission of salvation. At the tomb of Peter we are also humbly seeking grace to fulfil our responsibility to our entire flock with renewed fortitude and even greater pastoral love. It is with the power of

the Gospel of Christ that we confront all the pastoral situations and problems linked to our ministry. Only on this basis can we build the Church, which is the germ and beginning of God's Kingdom on earth and the leaven of all society. Through the power of God's word we find energy to promote justice, witness to love, uphold the sacredness of life and proclaim the dignity of the human person and his transcendent destiny. In short, with the power of the Gospel we go forth serenely and confidently to proclaim "the unsearchable riches of Christ". Because of the centrality of God's word, we are called to give absolute pastoral priority to the ever more effective guarding and teaching of the deposit of faith. In this regard Saint Paul challenges us constantly to apostolic vigilance: "Before God and before Jesus Christ who is to be judge of the living and the dead, I put this duty to you, in the name of his Appearing and of his kingdom: proclaim the message and, welcome or unwelcome, insist on it. Refute falsehood, correct error, call to obedience – but do all with patience and with the intention of teaching".

At the same time, as Bishops we are urged to a deep pastoral concern for the sacred discipline common to the whole Church. This brings with it a need for a sensitivity to the delicate and sovereign action of the Holy Spirit in the life of our people, and a humble realization that this action is accomplished in a special way through the ministry of the Bishops who, united with the entire Episcopal College and with Peter its head, are promised the assistance of the Holy Spirit, so that they may effectively lead the faithful to salvation.

At this moment in the life of the Church there are two particular aspects of sacramental discipline that are worthy of the special attention of the universal Church, and I wish to mention them, in order to assist Bishops everywhere. These matters form part of that general discipline of which the Apostolic See has prime responsibility, and in which the Pope wishes to sustain his Brethren in the Episcopate and to offer a word of encouragement and pastoral orientation for the spiritual wellbeing of the faithful. These two matters are the practice of first Confession before first Communion and the question of general absolution.

After some initial experimentation had been conducted, Paul VI in 1973 reiterated the discipline of the Latin Church in regard to first Confession. In a spirit of exemplary fidelity, numerous Bishops, priests, deacons, religious, teachers and catechists set out to explain the importance of a discipline which the supreme authority of the Church had confirmed, and to apply it for the benefit of the faithful. Ecclesial communities were comforted to know that the universal Church gave renewed assurance for a pastoral matter in which, previously, honest divergence of opinion existed. I am grateful to you for your own vigilance in this regard and ask you to continue to explain the Church's solicitude in maintaining this universal discipline, so rich in doctrinal background and confirmed by the experience of so many local Churches. With regard to children who have reached the age of reason, the Church is happy to guarantee the pastoral value of having them experience the sacramental expression of conversion before being initiated into the Eucharistic sharing of the Paschal Mystery.

As Supreme Pastor, Paul VI manifested similar deep solicitude for the great question of conversion in its sacramental aspect of individual Confession. In an ad limina visit earlier this year he referred at some length to the Pastoral Norms governing the use of general absolution, showing that these norms are in fact linked to the solemn teaching of the Council of Trent concerning the divine precept of individual confession. Once again he indicated the altogether exceptional character of general absolution. At the same time he asked the Bishops to help their priests "to have an ever greater appreciation of the splendid ministry of theirs as Confessors... Other works, for lack of time may have to be

postponed or even abandoned, but not the Confessional". I thank you for what you have done and will do to show the importance of the Church's wise discipline in an area that is so intimately linked with the work of reconciliation. In the name of the Lord Jesus, let us give assurance, in union with the whole Church, to all our priests of the great supernatural effectiveness of a persevering ministry exercised through auricular confession, in fidelity to the command of the Lord and the teaching of his Church. And once again let us assure all our people of the great benefits derived from frequent Confession. I am indeed convinced of the words of my predecessor Pius XII: " Not without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was this practice introduced into the Church".

Our Lord Jesus Christ himself insisted on the essential indissolubility of marriage. His Church must not allow his teaching on this matter to be obscured. She would be untrue to her Master if she did not insist, as he did, that whoever divorces his or her marriage partner and marries another commits adultery. The unbreakable union between husband and wife is a great mystery or sacramental sign in reference to Christ and the Church. It is by preserving the clarity of this sign that we will best manifest the love that it signifies: the supernatural love that unites Christ and the Church, that binds together the Savior and those whom he saves.

And in all your apostolic activities be assured of my fraternal love. I am at one with you and your clergy – for whom I pray daily – in thanking God for the many graces bestowed on the people of your Dioceses: for their renewed sense of collective solidarity in the mission of the Church, for fresh signs of spiritual awakening, for increased devotion to God's word, for deeper understanding of social responsibility, and for the fortitude of the young in responding to the call of Christ. May the renewal that we all desire also include a preservation and strengthening of the great Canadian heritage of evangelical service, especially in furnishing missionaries in large numbers throughout the Church, in order to preach the Gospel of Christ. May the joy and peace of Christ Jesus be powerfully communicated through your pastoral ministry and through that of your beloved priests. And may all of us find encouragement and perseverance in realizing fully that "our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ".

Mettant joyeusement vos pas dans les pas de vos Prédécesseurs, vous êtes venus, chers Frères, vous agenouiller sur la tombe de l'Apôtre Pierre, comme je l'ai fait moi-même tant de fois, venant de Cracovie.

Cette démarche personnelle et communautaire, toujours émouvante, comporte un sens très profond, un engagement extrêmement exigeant. Nous savons tous qu'en dépendance du Christ, qui est la seule Pierre angulaire, l'humble pêcheur de Galilée a été appelé par Jésus lui-même le Roc de l'Eglise. C'est ce Roc qui permet au Peuple de Dieu de grandir à travers le temps et l'espace sur des bases solides, c'est-à-dire sur la foi essentielle, de demeurer en lien profond et permanent avec le Christ Source de Vie, de maintenir et de reconstruire l'unité entre les disciples, de résister à l'usure du temps et aux courants extérieurs – et parfois internes – de dissolution et de désagrégation. Oh! certes, l'Esprit Saint est toujours à l'oeuvre, et je me réjouis avec vous des renouveaux inattendus, des approfondissements réels que vous constatez dans vos communautés. Ils sont les fruits de l'Esprit Mais les Pasteurs que nous sommes doivent demeurer vigilants, clairvoyants, dans l'espérance et l'humilité. Les forces de dissolution et de désagrégation sont aussi à l'oeuvre. La parabole du bon grain et de l'ivraie est toujours actuelle. C'est pour cela que nous devons, nous d'abord, les Pasteurs, professer haut et clair la foi, la doctrine de l'Eglise, toute la doctrine de l'Eglise. C'est pour cela qu'il nous faut adhérer et entraîner hardiment l'adhésion des fidèles à la discipline sacramentelle de l'Eglise, garante de la continuité et de l'authenticité de l'action salvatrice du Christ, garante de la dignité et de l'unité du culte chrétien, et

finalement garante de la véritable vitalité du Peuple de Dieu. Voilà ce que requiert le service – qui nous est commun – du salut des âmes. Voilà ce qu'implique avant tout la visite “ad limina Apostolorum”.

Que le Seigneur Jésus vous aide lui-même à devenir, avec Pierre, le roc sur lequel s'édifient vos communautés. Mon service, à moi, est de contribuer à vous affirmer. Je vous accompagnerai par la prière dans votre ministère. Priez aussi pour moi. Et bénissons ensemble toutes vos chères communautés diocésaines.

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