



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF THE NORTH EASTERN REGION OF INDIA

Friday, 20 June 1986

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. Not many months have passed since our heavenly Father enabled me to celebrate the Eucharist with you and with representatives of your respective Dioceses at Shillong. Together we listened to the word of God and shared in the breaking of bread and in prayers .

As you, the Bishops of the North Eastern region of India, are making your ad limina visit, it is a source of profound joy for me to recall the beauty of the North-East hills and plains, the rich variety of your peoples' ethnic and cultural heritage, and the vitality of your local Churches. The words of Saint Paul to the Corinthians echo my sentiments: "I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus" .

The grace of God was given you in Christ Jesus. The work of evangelization which was begun in your area only a hundred years ago, the work over which you preside today, is a gift of God to the people of your land. The word that has been preached is the word of God. The sacraments which have nourished the life of your communities are the efficacious signs of Christ's grace at work among you. The Christian life which has steadily grown among the various ethnic groups of the region is indeed a treasured gift of God.

The men and women who have planted the seed and nourished it with care have been the faithful "servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart" . Today in that same field you and your collaborators are "God's fellow workers" . This is your privilege and your great responsibility.

2. My visit took place within a context of particular significance for the Church in North-East India. Your Dioceses are now in the sixth of a Novena of years of preparation for the celebration in 1990 of the centenary of the establishment of the Church in your region. When I was among you at Shillong I spoke briefly of the history of the Assam mission and of the dedicated men and women

who were the apostles of the Gospel of Christ to your peoples. Again today we give thanks to God for them. Inspired by their example, may all who exercise the various degrees of responsibility in your local Churches renew their resolve to carry forward in diligence and joy the work begun almost a hundred years ago.

In preparation for the centenary, each year you have issued a Joint Pastoral Letter on a theme of fundamental importance for the life of your communities. Thus you have written on the Church, Christian living, Evangelization, Catechesis, Christian Marriage and the Family, and most recently, on the theme of Youth. This is a subject particularly close to your hearts, since your young people play a vital role in the Church's growth in North-East India.

In these Pastoral Letters you have focused attention on aspects of the Church's life on which the Second Vatican Council offered authoritative teachings and valuable pastoral insights. Thus the extraordinary grace of renewal which the Council represented for the entire ecclesial body is being assimilated into the minds and hearts of the faithful; in the first place into the minds and hearts of the priests, religious and committed lay persons who labour with you in building up the Churches entrusted to you.

As your Brother in the episcopal ministry, sharing with you the responsibility of caring for the Church of God, I wish to commend you for the timeliness of your initiative. As Saint Paul encouraged the elders of the Church of Ephesus: "I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance". Let us pray that the Lord of the harvest, who alone gives the growth, may bless the opening of the second century of the Church's presence among your peoples with a further flourishing of Christian life.

3. Within your communities you, the pastors, have a specific mission entrusted to you by the Lord himself: that of spreading his Church, ministering to it under his guidance and shepherding it until he comes again.

There is one aspect of your pastoral mission about which I wish to reflect with you, and indeed with all who have a share in the Church's service to the human family. It is the question of the centrality and primacy of the person in relation to every aspect of the Church's activity.

This reflection applies first of all to the very content of evangelization. The heart of your pastoral ministry is the preaching of the Good News of salvation in the person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. The message is not merely a theory or doctrine, however sublime. The first obligation of the apostle is to bear witness to the person of our Lord and Saviour: "that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you".

The basic content therefore of evangelization and catechesis is not an abstract lesson for living, but the reality of the Son of God and Son of Man, our Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, "to evangelize is

first of all to bear witness in a simple and direct way to God revealed by Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit: to bear witness that in his Son God has loved the world – that in his Incarnate Word he has given being to all things and has called men to eternal life" .

In the earliest days of the Church the Apostles gave pride of place to the kerygmatic announcement of the Redemption worked by the Death and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth: "they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead" . Paul too made the person of Christ the special object of his preaching: "I decided to know nothing among you except Christ Jesus and him crucified" . The Church has never ceased to proclaim the one in whom "the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" .

4. Today in your local Churches you are the witnesses to Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God . In the words I used when speaking to all the Bishops of India gathered at New Delhi: "You are called to proclaim salvation, mercy and compassion in the name of God who 'so loved the world that he gave his only Son'" .

In relation to catechesis you yourselves have written: "To acknowledge Christ as the centre of catechesis would imply that we teach about him, that whatever we say or do will have a reference to him, and above all, that he himself is the Teacher" .

I wish to encourage you never to lose sight of the centrality of the person of Jesus Christ in every activity aimed at building up the Christian community. The servants of the Gospel must always be careful not to teach a message deprived of its substance or to transform the message of salvation into a mere theory of social and economic justice. The fervour and resourcefulness of your Churches depend on the measure in which the person of our Lord remains the focal point of your lives and endeavours. The importance you give to the Bible in the formation of your communities offers the assurance that their prayer and spiritual life will be founded on the solid basis of the word of God. I gladly note that you have implemented various initiatives in this field.

5. I also wish to refer briefly to the primacy of the person in relation to the planning and execution of programmes of evangelization and human advancement. The object of the Church's care is the human person made in the image of God and called to live, act and, in turn, be treated according to the supreme commandment of love.

In the concrete circumstances of your Churches, evangelization embraces many forms of service of your peoples' well-being and development – spiritual, social and material. As the Apostolic Exhortation "[Evangelii Nuntiandi](#)" points out, "between evangelization and human advancement – development and liberation – there are in fact profound links" . These links are anthropological and theological. The people to whom evangelization is directed live and act within particular social and economic structures, which themselves are destined to be influenced by the Gospel message of liberation. Indeed, the plan of Redemption "touches the very concrete situations of injustice to be

combated and of justice to be restored" . There is no doubt therefore that the Church's activity is directed to the progress and advancement of people at every level of their existence. Your own ministry embraces a multitude of concerns, as manifested in the great variety of educational, charitable and social works which you promote and encourage.

The Social Doctrine of the Church which guides your endeavours to promote the integral development of your people is entirely built on the value of the human person and the demands of his dignity in the context of God's plan for the human family. In the Church's pastoral mission, "what matters is to evangelize man's culture and cultures... always taking the person as one's starting-point and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God" .

This truth needs to be constantly repeated today when so many individuals tend to be submerged in the anonymity of living or feel that they are being considered merely as part of a category in terms of political and social planning and action.

6. By underlining the centrality of the person in the Church's mission we avoid the danger of losing contact with the very men and women, young and old, to whom the Lord sent us. The command to "feed my lambs, feed my sheep" which Jesus addressed to Peter remains for ever the paradigm of pastoral action.

To have said this is not to have solved the many questions which you face each day in your ministry. It is only to have recalled together the path of the Church's service. My prayer is that Christ's love for every man and woman will ever fill your hearts and the hearts of all your collaborators. In this way the necessary work of development, justice and freedom will be in fact the evangelical work of salvation and the construction of a true "civilization of love".

7. Through you, I wish to send my warmest greetings to the priests, the men and women religious and the catechists whom you are representing here. I ask you to take my goodwill and encouragement to your young people, to the children, the old and the sick.

May Mary, Mother of the Church, sustain you all by her prayer and example. She will remind you always to make Jesus the centre of your lives and of your actions.

May the Lord give you joy and peace in his service.

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