



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT IN AUSTRALIA

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE RELIGIOUS PEOPLE
GATHERED IN THE SYDNEY'S OPERA HOUSE**

Sydney (Australia), 26 November 1986

"I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus...". Dear Brothers and Sisters, men and women Religious of Australia,¹ I have greatly looked forward to this meeting. And now with joy in my heart I see you here, representing the whole of religious life in this land. As I speak to you in this magnificent concert hall of Sydney's Opera House, I am very much aware of being with dedicated men and women living out their consecrated lives in every corner of Australia. I greet each one of you in Christ, in whom you lack no spiritual gift. In the name of the whole Church, I wish to honour the tradition of religious life which you represent. From the beginning, consecrated men and women have been a vital part of the very fabric of the Church's life in this country, and have made a contribution to the Christian and human development of Australia which is beyond calculation.² The first ecclesiastical administration of this region was entrusted to the English Benedictines. In 1834, John Bede Polding was appointed Vicar Apostolic of New Holland and in 1842 was named first Archbishop of this city. In 1838 the Irish Sisters of Charity came here to begin an apostolate among women convicts, orphans, the sick and others in need. In the footsteps of these pioneer men and women, others too numerous to mention here have lived their religious consecration and given of themselves totally and unceasingly. They have served a growing society with its many needs. Particular mention should be made of the role of religious in implementing the inspired decision of the bishops in the latter part of the nineteenth century to establish a comprehensive school system of Catholic education. In cities as well as in smaller communities, men and women religious have been the support not only of this educational system but also of health care and social works, which are an integral part of the development of Australia. The presence of dedicated religious serving the needs of the Catholic population in both town and country has led to a remarkable closeness between the religious and the Catholic laity. There is a relationship of deep trust, love and mutual respect between you and the people you serve, a relationship which I am confident you will maintain and continue to deserve. I wish to pay tribute to all the religious who have lived and served in this country during the past hundred and fifty years. I thank God for his gift of such outstanding witnesses to the beauty and strength of the Gospel. I give thanks for so many lives lived according to the grace of God given in Christ Jesus. One outstanding witness known to me, because her cause has been introduced, is Mary MacKillop, Mother Mary of the Cross, Foundress of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart. With you I share the

hope that before long all the requirements for her beatification will be fulfilled, thus setting a special seal of approval on religious life in Australia.³ Today there are approximately eleven thousand women religious, one thousand six hundred brothers and two thousand religious priests in Australia. There is so much to thank God for, including the rich variety of charisms in religious life which he has raised up in Australia. I wish to say a special word to the contemplatives among you. Dear religious: you will always have an important part to play in building up Christ's Mystical Body. Its members do not all have the same function. You offer God an excellent sacrifice of praise; you gladden the community of God's people with your witness of holiness and you increase it through a hidden apostolic fruitfulness. I commend to your prayers and sacrifices the needs of the Church in Australia and in the whole world, and I assure you of the Church's gratitude for the gift of your lives. To the sisters and brothers and priests engaged in the many forms of the active apostolate I offer my encouragement and express my esteem. I thank you for your love of the Church and for your sharing in her saving mission. It is indeed hard to imagine what the Church in Australia would be like today without the contribution of your congregations in every field of her activity. I am pleased to know that in more recent years there has been an increased presence of religious in the ethnic communities. There is also an important missionary movement of Australian religious, in Papua New Guinea, the Pacific, Asia, Africa and South America. We can only rejoice at the power of God's love at work in Australia through the witness of your religious consecration and, beyond your borders, through your missionaries. I wish to add that I am very pleased that religious of the Anglican Communion are also here today. I thank you for the love shown by your presence, and I express the hope that through the grace of God given in Christ Jesus we may be led along the path of holiness and discipleship to full fellowship in him and in his Church.⁴ Religious face great challenges at this particular time in the history of the Church and of this country. Health care, social welfare and the education of the young, which have been traditional apostolates of the religious of Australia, have become recognized as areas of responsibility for your Governments and now play a large part in their policies. Of itself this is a factor of progress in the development of society. But for you, and for the Church, it represents a serious challenge to reaffirm the specific character of Catholic health care, Catholic social welfare and Catholic education. Your contribution in these fields has in fact become more important than ever in the light of the rapid secularization taking place in Australian society as in other parts of the world. Within these fields, you are in a special way witnesses to the Gospel message of salvation in Christ Jesus. Another challenge is represented by the huge post-war immigration of people from Europe and Asia. Here you have discovered new areas of Christian and pastoral responsibility. There is the call of service to the Aboriginal people and the defence of their inalienable dignity. There is the challenge arising from so many old and new forms of poverty in today's society. The young often feel lost and frustrated. They need sure guides. They need the inspiration of your religious commitment. They need you to make Christ known to them in a way that will satisfy the innermost stirrings of their hearts. There is a need too for religious communities themselves to reflect the ethnic mix of the nation as a whole.⁵ Of all the tasks facing you there is surely none so urgent as bearing authentic witness to your personal love of Jesus Christ above all else. This is at the very heart of your religious identity. The evangelical counsels which you profess through vows constitute the specific note of your lives, and they cannot be understood except in the context of a total response to the love of God revealed in Christ. It is Christ, the Lord and Master of your lives, who has called you to be religious, in and through the Church, in and through the Church, in and through your communities. It is to him that you have responded with a love that renounces all else for the sake of his Kingdom. And in that renunciation you have gained all, and have become all things to all people in order to win them for Christ. Brothers and sisters, religious of Australia, your Christian dignity depends principally not on what you do in service to the Church and to the world, but on what you are: consecrated followers of Christ, witnesses to a new and eternal life gained by the Redemption of Christ, imitators of the state of life which the Son of God took on in coming into this world. Because of your special relationship

to Christ, you belong inseparably to the life and holiness of his Body, the Church. Through your lives the Church needs to be able to speak the message of Christ in truth and in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the deepest meaning of what is rightly called your prophetic role. The prophet's word must be authenticated by the witness of obedience to the Lord and to his Church. And because the same Holy Spirit who dwells in your hearts has always assisted the Apostles and their successors in their teaching, we know that your fidelity to the Magisterium will ever be the guarantee of a correct reading of "the signs of the times". In your lives of consecration and prophetic witness you experience a deep personal need for prayer – individual, communal and liturgical prayer. Prayer is the very expression of your identity as men and women consecrated to Jesus Christ, and it is a primary duty of all religious. It is also the secret of your interior joy. Fifteen years later we are still struck by the prophetic words of Paul VI, who said "Do not forget the witness of history: faithfulness to prayer or its abandonment is the test of the vitality or decadence of the religious life".⁶ Total love of Christ and freedom of spirit for the service of God's people are expressed in a clear way in chastity practised for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven. Chastity is above all a gift of love from Christ to you, and through you to the Church. To experience deeply Christ's love and then to return it in joyful selfgiving is a daily challenge. To accept this challenge is to transcend yourselves and to leave behind any preoccupation with self. Then there will be room in your hearts for all human beings, especially the most needy – but you must love them all in the heart of Christ. Australia needs witnesses to sacrificial love. Australia needs you to show that the love of Christ and his Church is all-consuming, all-satisfying, all embracing. In a society blessed with material well-being, the witness of poverty, voluntarily embraced in imitation of Christ, pleads with force and conviction for the weak, the dispossessed and those who hunger for justice. But in order to be truly on the side of the poor, religious poverty has to be a genuine sharing in the poverty of Christ, who placed himself in the Father's hands and who made himself accessible to all without discrimination. His power to uplift the poor and the downtrodden lay in the very truth which he embodied. In your obedience you come especially close to Jesus, the servant of God, whose food was to do the will of the one who sent him and to accomplish his work. Obedience was not just a fact of life in Jesus' earthly existence. It constituted the very essence of his messianic mission. It was his response to the original rebellion which had contaminated the whole course of human history. As Saint Paul writes: "All the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God". Evangelical obedience, which leads directly to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ, finds expression in willing participation in community life, where all should be of one heart and one mind. A unity of spirit and a communion of life are, in fact, signs of Christ's life-giving presence.⁷ Saying all this does not make your religious consecration any less a true sharing in the Cross of Christ. Not every question is answered; not every problem is solved. But there can be no genuine renewal of religious communities, as called for in our times by the Second Vatican Council and as clearly inspired by the Holy Spirit who leads the Church, without a return to the essential starting point: Jesus' call and your response of love. The effectiveness of your whole mission in the Church is intimately linked to the intensity of your response of love. Your practice of the evangelical counsels speaks to contemporary Australia about the God who called you. It draws attention to Jesus – the Way, the Truth and the Life – because he is your model. As religious you will often be silently confronted with the plea that people addressed to the Apostle Philip: "We wish to see Jesus". There are countless people in Australia asking to see Jesus and to see him in you. They will be satisfied only if they can discover Jesus in you. What is more, they will judge Jesus by the image of him that you reflect in your lives. Perhaps they will accept him; perhaps they will reject him. But many will be influenced by the image of Jesus that you present.⁸ I am deeply aware that you are concerned about the number of vocations to the religious life. This is undoubtedly a serious problem for many local Churches and communities. In this respect the words of Christ challenge us; they show us that prayer must be our first response to the shortage of vocations. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to speak to the hearts of the young. And we need to be sure that what we offer

them is indeed the word and the challenge and the promise of Jesus. Those whom Christ calls to your houses of formation have a right to receive the Church's authentic doctrine and her proper understanding of religious life. Only in this way will their consecrated love be fully grafted into the Church and their apostolate become a fruitful channel of Christ's grace for themselves and for others. The present problems are the Lord's way of summoning us to greater faith in him, to a greater witnessing to the wonders of his ways, and to a deeper trust in the One who alone controls our future. We have heard the words of today's reading: "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of the Son, Jesus Christ our Lord". God who is faithful will sustain you. He calls you to trust him.⁹ Dear religious, sisters, brothers and priests of Australia: what is the hope that the Successor of Peter expresses in your regard? What can I say to you to show the completeness of my solidarity and union with each one of you in the following of Christ? I express the hope and prayer that you will always walk in "newness of life", for a new life in Christ is what has been given to you in baptism and strengthened in you through your confirmation. By your consecration in the Church you are called to bear a particular witness to this life. You are called to embrace God's life-giving word in a radical way. You are called to exemplify, with prophetic anticipation, the sacrificial love which the whole Church is meant to draw from the Paschal Mystery of the Lord. Religious life in Australia is anything but a thing of the past. It is one of the most precious assets of our time, for it is a clear indication of the Gospel values that alone can lead society out of the spiritual desert in which so many of our contemporaries live. The challenge is enormous precisely because it requires so much individual and community commitment. In the last analysis, it requires of you a great love in Christ of the brothers and sisters who need your service. It requires a total sacrifice: we are willing to give in proportion as we love, and when love is perfect the sacrifice is complete. Your companion along the way is Mary, Mother of Jesus and Mother of the Church. May you ever be able to repeat her words: "My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour... for he who is mighty has done great things for me". Yes, dear sisters and brothers, the Lord has done great things for you, and through you for Australia. Praised be the name of the Lord! *Praised be Jesus Christ!* © Copyright 1986 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana