



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

*Tuesday 31 May, 1988*

*Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,*

1. Once again it is a great joy for me to welcome a group of American Bishops. In you I greet all the priests, deacons, Religious and laity of the Provinces of Louisville, Mobile and New Orleans. Memories of New Orleans encourage me to send special greetings to those groups that I met there: the youth of America, the apostles of Catholic education, the beloved black community throughout your land, and all those striving to meet the challenge of greatness in higher Catholic education. At the same time I remember in my thoughts and cherish in my heart all the faithful of America, far whom we are striving to provide true pastoral service in the name of "the Chief Shepherd of the flock" (1 *Petr.* 5, 4), our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

In all the pastoral events that I experience with you, the Bishops of the United States – each event in continuity with the preceding ones – it is my intention to reflect with you on *an organic pastoral view* of our Episcopal ministry. This organic view must take into account the perennial exigencies of the Gospel; it must also express the indisputable priorities of the life of the Church today, both in her universal needs and in the special requirements of the Church in the United States. At the same time it must faithfully reflect *the call of the Second Vatican Council to reform and renewal* as reiterated by the Bishop of Rome and the worldwide Episcopate in communion with him. This communion is especially evident in the different sessions of the Synod of Bishops, the conclusions of which are of special urgency for all pastoral planning in the Church.

2. One of the essential themes of the Gospel that has been emphasized by both the Second Vatican Council and the Synod of Bishops in *the call to penance or conversion* – and consequently to reconciliation – incumbent on all members of the Church, and particularly relevant to our own lives and ministry as Bishops. *Conversion as proclaimed by Christ is a whole program of life and*

*pastoral action*. It is the basis for an organic view of pastoral ministry because it is linked to all the great aspects of God's revelation.

Conversion speaks to us about the need to acknowledge the primacy of God in the world and in our individual lives. It presupposes the reality of sin and the need to respond to God in and through Christ the Saviour, who frees us from our sins. Christ's command of conversion imposes on us "the obedience of faith" (*Rom. 1, 5*) in all its implications.

Conversion becomes for us a *synthesis of the Gospel*, and repeated conversions throughout the ages reflect the unceasing action of the Risen Christ on the life of the Church. Jesus himself introduces us to the meaning of penance or conversion when he says: "Repent and believe in the Gospel" (*Marc. 1, 15*). Conversion signifies an *internal change* of attitude and of approach to God and to the world. This is the way the Church has always understood this reality. The Synod of 1983 described it as "the inmost change of heart under the influence of the word of God and in the perspective of the Kingdom", and again as "a conversion that passes from the heart to deeds, and then to the Christian's whole life" (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 4).

3. Our conversion is understood as *a response to the call of Jesus* to embrace his Gospel and enter his Kingdom. His call had been anticipated by the Precursor of his Kingdom, John the Baptist: "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand" (*Matth. 3,2*). Jesus himself entrusted this call to his Apostles and through them to us. On the day of Pentecost it was taken up by Peter who encouraged the people to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Messiah, saying: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (*Act. 2, 38*). The Apostle Paul bore public testimony to the fact that he "preached the need to repent and turn to God, and to do works giving evidence of repentance" (*Ibid. 26, 20*).

In imitating the Apostles Peter and Paul, by striving to embrace the reality of conversion and by preaching it, we are in effect proclaiming the full content of the truth that Jesus revealed about repentance. In speaking of conversion or penance we direct people's attention to God himself and to the need to live in conformity with the truth that God has expressed regarding human nature. To call to conversion means to proclaim God's dominion over all creation, especially over all humanity. It means extolling God's law and acknowledging all the practical effects of creation. In the act of conversion the human person proclaims his or her dependence on God and acknowledges *the need to obey God's law in order to live in freedom*.

Conversion presupposes an *acknowledgment of the reality of human rebellion* against the majesty of God. In each person's heart conversion signifies the vast superiority of grace over sin, so much so that "where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more" (*Rom. 5, 20*). Conversion is made possible and actually brought about in human hearts by the victory of Jesus in his Paschal Mystery. Every individual conversion is an expression of the divine plan whereby human beings

must consent to God's salvific action. Hence every conversion expresses the nobility of human effort and at the same time its total insufficiency. *Every conversion proclaims the supremacy of grace.*

4. By reflecting on Jesus' words to be converted, to repent, to open our hearts to life and grace, to renounce sin, we discover *the relationship between conversion and God's love*, the relationship between conversion and God's power. As we reflect on the call of Jesus to do penance we discover *the new world of mercy*, which is revealed in the Cross. The Cross of Jesus Christ is indeed, as I have stated before, "a radical revelation of mercy, or rather of the love that goes against what constitutes the very root of evil in the history of man: against sin and death... the Cross of Christ, in fact, makes us understand the deepest roots of evil" (*Dives in Misericordia*, 8).

*Mercy in turn presumes conversion* on the part of all of us, and the notion of conversion forces us to reflect on the *truth* which we must live. It often happens that when the Church speaks of the requirements of truth in relation to conversion and mercy the world reacts negatively. But the Church cannot proclaim the reality of God's infinite mercy without pointing out how *the acceptance of mercy requires an openness to God's law*. It requires the personal observance of God's law as a response to his covenant of mercy. In demonstrating his fidelity to his fatherly love, God cannot contradict his own truth. Hence true conversion, which consists *in discovering God's mercy*, includes repentance from whatever negates the truth of God expressed in human nature.

5. At the same time conversion brings with it *reconciliation*. Reconciliation is *the result of conversion*. It is the gift of the heavenly Father given through Christ and in the Holy Spirit to those who are converted. In the words of Saint Paul: God "has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation".

Conversion remains *the key to all reconciliation* and to the Church's ministry of reconciliation. *All individual and collective reconciliation springs from the conversion of hearts*. The social fabric of the Church and the world will be reformed and renewed only when conversion is interior and personal. The needed reform of oppressive economic and political structures in the world cannot be effected without the conversion of hearts. The reconciliation of humanity at the level of individuals, communities, peoples and blocs of nations presumes the conversion of individual hearts and must be based on truth. The Synod on Reconciliation and Penance fully proclaimed this truth, showing how *at the basis of all divisions there is personal sin*, the ultimate essence and darkness of which is "disobedience to God" (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 14, cfr. 16).

6. In being called to be a sign of reconciliation in the world, the Church is therefore called to be a sign of conversion from sin and of obedience to God's law. In her very nature the Church is the great sacrament of reconciliation. To live this truth fully she must at all times be both a reconciled and reconciling community that proclaims the *divisive power of every personal sin* but above all the *reconciling and unifying power of Christ's Paschal Mystery*, in which love is stronger than sin

and death.

In fidelity to her mission the Church must preach the existence of evil and sin. With great insight the Synod of Bishops acknowledged with Pope Pius XII that “the sin of the century is the loss of the sense of sin” (Cfr. *Ibid.* 18) . In the [Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation](#) I noted that the “restoration of a proper sense of sin is the first way of facing the grave spiritual crisis looming over man today” (*Ibid.*). Already the early Church had reacted vigorously to *the illusion of sinlessness* on the part of some, as stated in the First Letter of Saint John: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 *Jo.* 1, 8).

When we take to heart this statement, we open ourselves to the action of the Holy Spirit who reveals to us our limitations and defects and “convicts” us of our sins of act and omission. At the same time, both as individuals and as communities in the Church we know that we have not yet reached our goal, we do not yet fully live the Gospel, we have not yet perfectly applied the Council. The more we have a sense of our limitations and personal sins, the more *we will divest ourselves of any sentiments of neo-triumphalism* and take to heart all pertinent observations and suggestions about our life and ministry.

7. Humbled before God and reconciled with him and within herself, the Church is able to pursue with interior freedom her *specific mission*, which is “to evoke conversion and penance in man’s heart and to offer him the gift of reconciliation” ([Reconciliatio et Paenitentia](#), 23). This she does in different ways, particularly through catechesis and the sacraments entrusted to her by Christ. At this moment in the Church’s life, both in the United States and throughout the world, it is opportune to reflect on the *Sacrament of Penance* with a view to reinforcing, in communion with the whole Church, an *organic pastoral approach* to a matter of such supreme importance for the conversion and reconciliation of the world.

The general experience of the Bishops participating at the Synod and of many others throughout the Church in regard to the use of this Sacrament was summarized in this way: “The Sacrament of Penance is in crisis.... For the Sacrament of Confession is indeed being undermined” (*Ibid.* 28). The statements are neither negative expression of pessimism nor causes for alarm they are rather expressions of a pastoral realism that requires positive pastoral reflection, planning and action. By the power of Christ’s Paschal Mystery that is active within her, the Church is capable of responding to all the crises that she ever faces, including this one. But she must make sure that she acknowledges the crisis, and that she adequately faces it with the supernatural means at her disposal.

8. In this crisis, which becomes *a challenge to the Church’s fidelity*, the Bishops have a particular responsibility, which they can meet with a unique effectiveness. In something as sacred as this Sacrament, *sporadic efforts are not enough to overcome the crisis*. For this reason I appeal today to you and through you to all the Bishops of the United States for organic pastoral planning in each

diocese to restore the Sacrament of Penance to its rightful place in the Church and to renew its use in full accordance with the intention of Christ.

A key point in this renewal process is “the obligation of pastors to facilitate for the faithful the practice of integral and individual confession of sins, which constitutes for them not only a duty but also an inviolable and inalienable right, besides being something needed for the soul” (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 33). In this task the Bishops need the support and fraternal collaboration of all concerned. Of special importance are the concerted efforts of all the members of the Conference of Bishops in insisting that the “*gravis necessitas*” required for general absolution be truly understood in the sense explained in [Canon 961](#). In various regions of the world, the crisis facing the Sacrament of Penance is due in part to unwarranted interpretations of what constitutes the conditions of the “*gravis necessitas*” envisioned by the Church. The Bishops, not only of the United States but of all countries, can make a great pastoral contribution to the true renewal of the Sacrament of Penance by their sustained efforts to do everything possible to promote the proper interpretation of [Canon 961](#). At stake is the whole question of the personal relationship that Christ wills to have with each penitent and which the Church must unceasingly defend. In the Encyclica “*Redemptor Hominis*” I spoke of this relationship as involving rights on the part of each individual and of Christ himself.

9. As Bishops we also contribute to true renewal by fraternally encouraging our priests to persevere in their incomparable ministry as confessors. This means that they must first travel this path of conversion and reconciliation themselves. In this too we must give them an example. Priests are meant by Christ to find immense spiritual fulfilment in accomplishing the Church’s “ministry of reconciliation” in a unique and supremely effective manner.

Reflection on the Sacrament of Penance as the Sacrament of conversion and reconciliation will truly help individuals and communities within the Church to understand the real nature of the renewal called for by the Second Vatican Council. The Sacrament of Penance is the actuation of Christ’s pastoral victory, because it is the personal application of his reconciling action to individual hearts. Without the proper use of the Sacrament of Penance all other forms of renewal will be incomplete, and at the same time the very reform and renewal of structures will be limited. For this reason the Sacrament of Reconciliation will prove to be a true key to social progress and a sure measure of the authenticity of all renewal in the Church in the United States and throughout the world.

10. As we move closer toward the year 2000, we must ever more effectively proclaim the fullness of Christ’s mercy and offer to the world the hope that is found only in a loving and forgiving Saviour. In order to accomplish this we are called to do everything possible *to promote the sacrament of mercy and forgiveness* in accordance with the Second Vatican Council, the pertinent liturgical norms of the Church, the Code of Canon Law and the conclusion of the Synod of 1983 as formulated in “*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*”. A goal of this magnitude cannot be attained without

the *constantly renewed collegial commitment of the worldwide Episcopate*. Today, in particular, I ask this commitment of you and all your brother Bishops in the United States. To each of you and to all your local Churches: "Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord" (1 *Tim.* 1,2).

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