



# The Holy See

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

*Friday, 2 September 1988*

*Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,*

1. With deep fraternal affection I welcome all of you, the Bishops of Regions XII and XIII. Our meeting today is meant to be not only an experience in ecclesial communion for us as Pastors of God's people, but also a *renewed commitment* on the part of all the Dioceses in the Provinces of Anchorage, Portland, Seattle, Denver and Santa Fe to that unity which Christ wills between the particular Churches and the universal Church.

At this moment our program calls us to reflect together on our ministry and on the profound pastoral solicitude that we as Bishops must have for humanity and for every human being. To be authentic, our Episcopal ministry must truly be *centred on man*. At the same time it must be *centred on God*, whose absolute primacy and supremacy we must constantly proclaim and urge our people to recognize in their lives.

The Vatican Council has invited us to adopt both of these approaches – *anthropocentrism and theocentrism* – and to emphasize them together, linking them in the only satisfactory way possible, that is in the divine Person of Christ, true God and true man.

This task for us is both formidable and exhilarating. The effect it can have on the local Churches is profound. In my Encyclical on God's Mercy I stated that the deep and organic linking of anthropocentrism and theocentrism in Jesus Christ is perhaps *the most important principle of the Second Vatican Council* (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Dives in Misericordia*, 1). The basic reason for this is the pastoral effectiveness of this principle.

2. In concentrating on Christ, the Church is able to exalt human nature and human dignity, for

*Jesus Christ is the ultimate confirmation of all human dignity.* The Church is also able to concentrate on humanity and on the well-being of each human being because of the fact that in the Incarnation Jesus Christ united all humanity to himself. In Christ, God the Father has placed the blueprint of humanity. At the same time in concentrating on Christ, the Church emphasizes the centrality of God in the world, for in Christ – through the hypostatic union – God has taken possession of man to the greatest possible degree.

To proclaim Christ to the full extent willed by the Second Vatican Council is to exalt man supremely and to exalt God supremely. To proclaim Christ fully is to proclaim him in the Father's plan of the Incarnation, which expresses man's greatest glory and God's greatest accomplishment in the world. *Anthropocentrism and theocentrism truly linked in Christ* open the way for the Church to a proper understanding of her pastoral service to humanity, for the glory of God.

3. As the Lawgiver of the New Testament, Christ links in his own person the two commandments of love of God and love of neighbour. While maintaining for the Church the priority of love of God, Saint Augustine clarifies its order of fulfilment: "Loving God comes first as a commandment, but loving one's neighbour comes first as a deed" (*Dei dilectio prior est ordine praecipendi proximi autem dilectio prior est ordine faciendi*) (S. Augustini *In Ioan. tract.*, 17). In this sense Saint John's words remain a lasting challenge to the Church: "One who has no love for the brother he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen" (*Io.* 4, 20).

In Christ – in his person and in his word – the Church discovers *the principle of her solicitude for humanity* (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Redemptor Hominis*, 15). Her inspiration and her strength in all dimensions of her pastoral service are found in Christ. With a view to serving man, the Church will always reflect on him in relationship to Christ and she will endeavour to approach God only through Christ. From this viewpoint it is possible to hold that "man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission he is the primary and fundamental way for the Church" (*Ibid* 14). At the same time, without contradiction we proclaim that "Jesus Christ is the chief way for the Church" (*Ibid.* 13). This is so because Christ is the fullness of humanity. Christ is God's expression of what humanity is meant to be, how humanity is meant to be transformed, how humanity is meant to be introduced into the communion of the Blessed Trinity, namely: "through him, and with him, and in him".

4. In speaking here of anthropocentrism, that is, in emphasizing the dignity of humanity in relation to Christ and to Church's mission, it is necessary to make reference to *the immutable basis of all Christian anthropology*, which is creation in the image and likeness of God (Cfr. *Gen.* 1, 26-27). This God is the God who reveals himself as a communion of persons, a saving God, a God of love and mercy.

In the Church's solicitude for man and for human dignity, which finds expression in every *social program* initiated by her, the Church must proclaim the reality of creation as it is renewed by the

redemption and by the uplifting – effected in Baptism – of each individual person. In her inner being the Church feels *impelled to proclaim human dignity*: the dignity of man raised to the level of Christ, to the level of divine adoption. Hence, with the proclamation of natural human dignity, the Church also proclaims *full Christian dignity*: the dignity of the children of God called to a supernatural dignity, called to worship the Father with Christ.

In speaking to the American Bishops five years ago, I made reference to “the pastoral service of making God’s people ever more conscious of their dignity as a people of worship” (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Allocutio ad quosdam episcopos e Foederatis Statibus Americae Septemtrionalis, occasione oblata 'ad Limina' visitationis coram admissos*, 8, die 9 iul. 1983: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VI, 2 (1983) 49). In particular I noted “that we can render a great pastoral service to the people by emphasizing their liturgical dignity and by directing their thoughts to the purposes of worship. When our people... realize that they are called to adore and thank the Father in union with Jesus Christ, *an immense power is unleashed in their Christian lives*” (*Ibid.*, 3: *loc cit.*, p. 47).

With regard to rights within the Church, Pope John Paul I, ten years ago, on the occasion of one of the two *ad Limina* visits of his short Pontificate – on the very day he died – spoke in these terms: “Among the rights of the faithful, one of the greatest is the right to receive God’s word in all its entirety and purity, with all its exigencies and power” (Ioannis Pauli PP. I *Allocutio ad quosdam sacros Praesules Insularum Philippinarum, occasione oblata eorum visitationis 'ad Limina'*, die 28 sept. 1978: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo I*, p. 100). Under every aspect the Church is irrevocably committed to the vigorous defence of all human and Christian rights, both in themselves and especially when these rights are threatened. With the realization that she lives in anticipation of the fullness of the Kingdom of God, she must pursue constantly the work of the Messiah, of whom the Psalmist says: “He shall have pity on the lowly and the poor; the lives of the poor he shall save. From fraud and violence he shall redeem them” (*Ps. 72, 13-14*). The Church must then always be at home among the poor, vigilant in the defence of all their rights.

5. In giving us the basis for the defence of human rights, Christ proclaims *a whole structure of human relationships*. He teaches us that to save our life we must lose it (Cfr. *Luc. 17, 33*). Indeed, the human being cannot fully find himself without first making a sincere gift of self (Cfr. *Gaudium et Spes*, 24). This is so because to be a person in the image and likeness of God is to exist in relation to another and to others. What Christ and his Church advocate is not the mere external defence of human rights, nor the mere defence of human rights by the organisms and structures at the disposal of the community – however providential and useful these may be – but the total commitment of giving on the part of each individual in the community so that the rights of all may be ensured through the great structure of proper human and Christian relationships in which the charity of Christ reigns supreme and in which justice is “corrected” by love (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Dives in Misericordia*, 14). This structure of personal relationships – the only one conducive to the full defence of human and Christian rights – must view the human being as created in the image and likeness of God as God exists: a communion of persons.

6. A phenomenon which militates against this whole structure of personal relationships and therefore against human rights, a phenomenon which I have brought to the attention of the whole Church is “the decline of many fundamental values, values which constitute an unquestionable good not only for Christian morality but simply for human morality, for moral culture: these values include respect for human life from the moment of conception, respect for marriage in its indissoluble unity, and respect for the stability of the family. ...Hand in hand with this go the crisis of truth in human relationships, lack of responsibility for what one says, the purely utilitarian relationship between individual and individual, the loss of a sense of the authentic common good and the ease with which this good is alienated” (*Ibid.* 12). Each one of these areas would merit to be developed at length. In the past I have spoken to you in some detail on some of these topics. I am profoundly grateful to you for your persevering efforts in so many pastoral challenges, one of the greatest being the defence and support of human life.

7. A major area of human rights in need of constant defence is that concerned with *the family* and its members, both parents and children (*Charter of the Rights of the Family*, art. 5). The Charter of the Rights of the Family presented five years ago by the Holy See has spelled out these rights and deserves renewed attention at this time. One of the fundamental principles enunciated in this document is “the original, primary and inalienable right” of parents to educate their children according to their moral and religious convictions, and to supervise closely and to control their sex education.

The Church must continue to present human sexuality as linked to God’s plan of creation and constantly proclaim *the finality and dignity of sex*.

Ways by which the human family is greatly wounded include the unsolved problems of immensely lucrative drug trafficking and pornography. Both of these plague society, debase human life and human love and violate human rights.

8. In dealing with *the specific rights of women as women*, it is necessary to return again and again to the immutable basis of Christian anthropology as it is foreshadowed in the Scriptural account of the creation of man – as male and female – in the image and likeness of God. Both man and woman are created in the image of *the personhood of God*, with inalienable personal dignity, and in complementarity-one with the other. Whatever violates the complementarity of women and men, whatever impedes the true communion of persons according to the complementarity of the sexes offends the dignity of both women and men.

Through the first draft of your proposed document on the concerns of women for the Church and society, I know that you are making real efforts to respond with sensitivity to these greatly varying concerns, by presenting women as partners in the mystery of the Redemption as this mystery is lived out in our day. You are rightly striving *to help eliminate discrimination based on sex*. You are also rightly presenting *Mary the Mother of God as a model of discipleship* and a sign of hope to all,

and at the same time as a special symbol and model for women in their partnership with God in the ministry of the Church.

Throughout the whole Church a great prayerful reflection still remains to be made on *the teaching of the Church* about women and about their dignity and vocation. I have already announced my own intention to publish a document on this subject, and this document will come out shortly. The Church is determined to place her full teaching, with all the power with which divine truth is invested, at the service of the cause of women in the modern world – to help clarify their correlative rights and duties, while defending their *feminine dignity and vocation*. The importance of true Christian feminism is so great that every effort must be made to present the principles on which this cause is based, and according to which it can be effectively defended and promoted for the good of all humanity. The seriousness of this commitment requires the collaboration not only of the entire College of Bishops also of the whole Church.

9. The status of all human dignity and all human rights is immeasurably enhanced by the supernatural condition and destiny of humanity, which are found only in relation to God, only in relation to Christ. Paul VI, in his powerful social Encyclical, "*Populorum Progressio*" wanted to present these elements together. He wanted the Church to follow a course of social action that would be solidly secure. In other words, he wanted to link human rights and dignity – indeed the whole of humanism – to God, in Christ. In a word, he wanted to insist that the Church can and must be both *anthropocentric and theocentric at the same time, by being Christocentric*, by concentrating on Christ, the Redeemer of man, the Redeemer of all humanity. This message of his is more important now than ever before for our people, namely that "by union with Christ man attains to new fulfilment of himself, to a transcendent humanism that gives him his greatest possible perfection" (Pauli VI *Populorum Progressio*, 16). And again: "There is no true humanism but that which is open to the Absolute and is conscious of a vocation which gives human life its true meaning" (*Ibid.* 42). For all of us this vocation is the Christian vocation – essentially linked to the Incarnation and to the cause of human dignity and human rights as they are incomparably spelled out by the Incarnate Word.

And when human justice is not only practised but "corrected" by love, the cause of all humanity is immeasurably enriched. *Through the charity of Christ* the Incarnate Word, *the horizons of service* – exercised in the name of the Gospel and of the mission of the Church – *are vastly extended*.

As Pastors of God's people, dear Brothers, we have known from experience how relevant all these principles are at every level of the Church, in every community of the faithful, no matter how small or how large. There is no other path to take than man and human dignity. There is no other direction in which to point him than to God. There is no other way to arrive than through *Christ*. In building up the Kingdom of God, there is no other cause than *the cause of humanity understood in the light of Christ*, who says: "As often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me" (*Matth.* 25, 40).

With these reflections, dear Brothers, I assure you of my prayers that all your local Churches will ever increasingly find in Christ the everlasting link between the cause of humanity and the Kingdom of God, and that in Christ they will experience inspiration and strength for their lives. May God reward you for your own zeal and generosity and for all the pastoral love with which you serve his holy people.

With my Apostolic Blessing.

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