



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

*Friday, 28 May 1993 Dear Brother Bishops,*1. This is a moment of profound joy for me, to be united with you – *the Bishops from Iowa, Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska* – in a spirit of prayer and fraternal communion. You have come to Rome for your *ad Limina* visit during the Novena of Pentecost, when we pray that the Spirit will renew the whole Church with the fire of his love. May you too "be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man... to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3: 16. 19). Just as the Apostles were united in prayer with "Mary, the mother of Jesus" (Acts. 1: 14), so, at the beginning of our meeting, we implore her intercession that the clergy, religious and faithful of your Dioceses may be renewed in faith and love for the tasks which lie before them. Today I express to you my prayerful hope for the spiritual renewal of the Church in America, insofar as *holiness of life is of the essence of the Church's mission and ministry*. And first we must praise God for the marvellous witness of holiness which has always been in evidence among American Catholics. The names of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, Saint John Neumann, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton stand out; but there have been so many others. In our own time, the Second Vatican Council's call to holiness, addressed to the whole of God's people, needs to be presented once more in all its evangelical urgency. This is what the Spirit is saying to the Churches (Cf. Rev. 2: 7): "but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1Pt. 1: 15-16).2. It is not an exaggeration to say that man's relationship to God and the demand for a religious "experience" are the crux of a profound crisis affecting the human spirit. While the secularization of many aspects of life continues, there is a new quest for "spirituality" as evidenced in the appearance of many religious and healing movements which look to respond to the crisis of values in Western society. This stirring of the *homo religiosus* produces some positive and constructive results, such as the search for new meaning in life, a new ecological sensitivity, and the desire to go beyond a cold, rationalistic religiosity. On the other hand, this religious re-awakening includes some very ambiguous elements which are incompatible with the Christian faith. Many of you have written Pastoral Letters on the problems presented by pseudo-religious movements and sects, including the so-called "New Age Movement". New Age ideas sometimes find their way into preaching, catechesis, workshops and retreats, and thus influence even practising Catholics, who perhaps are unaware of the incompatibility of those ideas with the Church's faith. In their syncretistic and immanent outlook, these parareligious movements pay little heed to Revelation, and instead try to come to God through knowledge and experience based on elements borrowed from Eastern spirituality or from psychological techniques. They tend to relativize religious doctrine, in favor of a vague world-view expressed as a system of myths and symbols dressed in religious language. Moreover, they often propose a pantheistic concept of God which is incompatible with Sacred Scripture and Christian Tradition. They replace personal

responsibility to God for our actions with a sense of duty to the cosmos, thus overturning the true concept of sin and the need for redemption through Christ.³ Yet, in the midst of this spiritual confusion, the Church's Pastors should be able to detect an authentic thirst for God and for an intimate, personal relationship with him. In essence, the search for meaning is the stupendous quest for the Truth and Goodness which have their foundation in God himself, the author of all that exists. Indeed, it is God himself who awakens this longing in people's hearts. The often silent pilgrimage to the Living Truth, whose Spirit "directs the course of the ages and renews the face of the earth" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 26), is a "sign of the times" which invites the Church's members to examine the credibility of their Christian witness (Cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 6). Pastors must honestly ask whether they have paid sufficient attention to the thirst of the human heart for the true "living water" which only Christ our Redeemer can give (Cf. Jn. 4: 7-13). They should insist on the spiritual dimension of the faith, on the perennial freshness of the Gospel message and its capacity to transform and renew those who accept it. Saint Paul tells us that we must "seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God" (Col. 3: 1). To neglect the supernatural dimension of the Christian life is to empty of meaning the mystery of Christ and of the Church: "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1Cor. 15: 19). Nevertheless, it is a sad fact that some Christians today are succumbing to the temptation "to reduce Christianity to merely human wisdom, a pseudo-science of well-being" (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 11). To preach a version of Christianity which benignly ignores, when it does not explicitly deny, that our ultimate hope is the "resurrection of the body and life everlasting" ("Symbolum Apostolorum") runs counter to Revelation and the whole of Catholic tradition. More vigorous preaching and catechesis on eschatological themes is needed in order to eliminate confusion regarding the true nature of Christian life and of the Church's unfailing hope in her Lord who is "the resurrection and the life" (Jn. 11: 25).⁴ The *"Catechism of the Catholic Church"* offers a summary of the truths about the "last things" which God has revealed to us in Christ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 988-1065). The absolute uniqueness of each human person and the finality of death (*Ibid.* n. 1013), the soul's immediate judgment after death (*Ibid.* n. 1022), prayer for the dead in need of purification preceding the vision of God (*Ibid.* nn. 1030-1032), and a sober reflection on the existence and eternity of hell—all these belong to a proclamation that is "obedient from the heart to the standard of preaching to which you were committed" (Rom. 6: 17). The "fullness of the truth which God has enabled us to know" (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 5) tells us that life in the body has a transcendent goal and that decisions and actions in this life have irrevocable consequences which cannot be ignored. While many prefer to avoid these ultimate questions and some are tempted to think of salvation as a right and as a foregone conclusion, the Church must continue to remind people of the awesome reality of human freedom, the price of salvation (Cf. 1Cor. 7: 23) and the riches of divine mercy (Cf. Eph. 2: 4). In doing so the Church is defending the worth and dignity of every individual against all efforts to trivialize human existence.⁵ To those who are thirsting for the Living God (Cf. Ps. 42(41): 2) you must answer *as men whose lives are "hid with Christ in God"* (Col. 3: 3) and as authentic teachers of the spiritual life. This is not to retreat into a religious privatism. It is to act in accordance with the true nature of the Church as sacrament and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of all mankind (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1). It is to ensure that ecclesial communion and social solidarity flow from their deepest source: the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ (Cf. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 18; Jn. 17: 3. 20). Your efforts to give a fresh impulse to the spiritual renewal of the Church in the United States will depend greatly on your careful attention to the spiritual formation of future priests. The implementation of *The Program of Priestly Formation* awaits your determined guidance and leadership. I wish to encourage you once more to give your best efforts to supporting the spiritual formation and growth of your priests, the vast majority of whom are devoted followers of Christ, ardent workers in his vineyard, and men who are deeply sensitive to the needs of their brothers and sisters.⁶ The call to holiness whereby God invites everyone to be "holy and blameless before him" (Eph. 1: 4), is addressed in a

specific way to those who are "consecrated to God in Jesus Christ as his exclusive possession" (John Paul II, *Redemptionis Donum*, 7). *The renewal of Religious Life* depends on each consecrated person's seeking and loving God above all else, ever bearing in mind that the "contemplation of divine things and assiduous union with God in prayer is to be the first and foremost duty of all Religious" (*Code of Canon Law*, [can. 663, 1](#)). The only effective way to reform Religious Life is the arduous path of personal and prayerful conversion, with a humble acknowledgment of one's mistakes and sins and with confidence that the "power of his resurrection" (Phil. 3: 10) will overcome all weakness and mediocrity, and heal the sense of disappointment and anger experienced by some Religious. The 1994 Assembly of the Synod of Bishops dedicated to *the consecrated life and its role in the Church and in the world* will provide the Church with an opportunity to read the "signs of the times" regarding the future of Religious Life. As a Conference and as individual pastors, you will undoubtedly examine, with objectivity and respect, the reasons for the decline in numbers and the continuing scarcity of vocations being experienced by many Institutes, while others flourish and new ones are being formed. Fortunately there are signs of a serious re-evaluation of attitudes and practices adopted in the post-conciliar years which, in the judgment of many Religious and lay people, have not brought the renewal advocated by the Second Vatican Council. It is a hopeful sign that many individual Religious and communities in the United States, having experienced the fruitlessness of self-preoccupation, of confusion over the meaning of the evangelical counsels, and the lack of a sense of corporate identity and apostolate, are now open to serious reflection on the Church's authentic traditions of religious consecration. History teaches that in many instances a decline in the fervor and vitality of Religious Life is linked to a corresponding decline in understanding and practising *evangelical poverty*. By imitating Christ who "became poor" for our sake (Cf. 2Cor. 8: 9) and freeing themselves from the tyranny of "having" over "being", Religious are called to be truly austere in their way of living and to "carry out a sincere review of their lives regarding their solidarity with the poor" (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 60). By their free and total gift of self to Christ and the Church, consecrated women and men provide a striking testimony that the spirit of the Beatitudes is the sole path of the world's transformation and of the restoration of all things in Christ (Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 31). I pray that your preparation for the Synod, in union with the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the recently formed Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious, and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men will be guided by reflection on the Church's teaching regarding the essential elements of Religious Life, by truthfulness in charity, and by a sincere openness to Christ who makes "all things new" (Rev. 21: 5). The Synod and its preparation is surely a time of grace, in which Religious Life in the United States, in all its variety of charisms and apostolic witness, can acquire a new vitality, a new power of attraction among the faithful, especially the young, when it is clearly seen to be a radical following of Christ.⁷ Finally, I wish to assure you that I look forward to joining the great pilgrimage of young people who will converge on Denver in August to celebrate the Eighth World Youth Day. We will gather to proclaim that Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Mary, is "the resurrection and the life" (Jn. 11: 25) and that we have come "to fullness of life in him" (Col. 2: 20). In the Mile High City, surrounded by the beauty of the "everlasting hills" (Deut. 33: 15), we will raise our hearts in praise for the perennial youth of the Church (Cf. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 2). More than merely a festive occasion, the gathering in Denver is intended to be an authentic moment of evangelization. When the saving word of Christ enters the sanctuary of the human heart, it invites each young person to become a courageous and generous evangelizer (Cf. John Paul II, *Message for World Youth Day 1993*, 4, 15 August 1992). I am confident that in the next few months the Bishops of the United States will make every effort to encourage and support the young people who wish to join the Successor of Peter in professing the Church's perennial faith: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matth. 16: 16). The Church counts on her young people, remade as "a new creation" (2Cor. 5: 17), to proclaim the Gospel in all the circles in which they move: in their families, among their friends, at school, in the work place. My visit to Denver will truly be a pilgrimage

which I, along with so many young men and women, am *preparing for through reflection, prayer and penance*. I invite you to join me in this so that we shall be spiritually ready for that *kairos*.⁸ Dear Brother Bishops, as Pastors you have been charged with expounding "the whole mystery of Christ" (*Christus Dominus*, 12). Allow me to exhort you to be ever faithful in this task. There are many reasons for persevering in trust. Not least, because it is Christ himself who has called you to this ministry and has given you the Holy Spirit for the building up of his body, the Church. Furthermore, you are convinced that "opening the doors to Christ, accepting him into humanity... is the only road to take to arrive at the total truth and the exalted value of the human individual" (John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, 34). You have every reason to be wise and courageous shepherds of the particular Churches entrusted to your ministry. Through the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church, I invoke an abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon you, and upon the priests, deacons, Religious and laity of your Dioceses. May the Spirit continue to work in the world through the hearts of all who believe (Cf. "Introitus" in Dominica Pentecostes). © Copyright 1993 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana