



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF FRANCE ON THEIR
AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM VISIT**

Saturday, 12 April 1997

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I am pleased to receive you, Pastors of the Church in the East-Central Region, at the end of the series of ad limina visits of the Bishops of France. At the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, you have *rediscovered the source of Gospel dynamism* which has inspired so many illustrious figures in your particular Churches, from Iranaeus, Francis de Sales, Margaret Mary, John Mary Vianney, Pauline Jaricot, Antoine Chevrier and the initiators of social Catholicism. Still today this dynamism continues to give life to the disciples of Christ for whom you are responsible and whose witness in the heart of society is guided by you.

Here I would like to pay tribute to the memory of Cardinal Albert Decourtray, a zealous Pastor of the Archdiocese of Lyons and a generous servant of the Church in France. I thank Archbishop Claude Feidt of Chambéry, your President, for his clear presentation of the life of your Dioceses. I was able to appreciate *the priests' apostolic sense* and observe the important place the laity have held in your area *in the Church's mission*. Gratitude for their specific vocation and their trusting collaboration with priests makes it possible to give greater vigour to ecclesial life. In your region I also know that *ecumenism*, inspired principally by Fr Couturier, is a constant pastoral orientation. Among the satisfactions and problems of daily life, may your communities remain a sign of hope for the future for all!

2. During my recent visit to France, the pilgrimage I made to the tomb of *St Martin of Tours* gave me the opportunity to meet a representative assembly of "life's wounded". You have wished to make that celebration a symbol of *the Church's resolute commitment* to those who are suffering,

those shunned by society or who are rejected on the paths of life. It is this essential aspect of the Church's mission that I would like to discuss with you today.

The quinquennial reports from the Dioceses of your country shed light on the serious *human problems facing society*. Indeed the economic crisis is leading part of the population to experience situations of poverty and instability which are having increasingly harsh effects on the younger generations. Helplessness with regard to difficult living conditions, social inequalities, unemployment whose causes are sometimes interpreted in a simplistic way impair relations between the different human groups within the national community. Life's uncertainties can also result in a withdrawal into self which prevents attention to the appeals of the most destitute around one and of less fortunate people.

It is fortunate in this period of far-reaching change that many are developing a clear *awareness of the interdependence* of individuals and nations, and of the need to practise true *solidarity* understood as "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all" (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, n. 38). The values of *liberty, equality and fraternity*, on which the French people have chosen to base their collective life, in some way express the conditions of solidarity without which it is impossible for man to live a full life among his brothers and sisters. A society's greatness is judged according to *the place it gives the human person*, and first of all the weakest, who cannot be considered only according to what they possess or can contribute by their activity.

3. Your *Bishops' Conference* has *intervened* on social issues several times, especially during the plenary assemblies and through its social commission. Recently again, you made an appeal not to regard "social marginalization" as a growing calamity in your country. Many of you also intervened to recall the Gospel tradition of defending the feeblest. It is in fact important that the Church's words be demonstrated *vigorously to public opinion*, to promote human dignity wherever it is threatened, and to uphold the Gospel principles which give meaning and value to all human life. Sent into the heart of the world to proclaim the Gospel of life, the Church is concerned for the wellbeing of all society with respect for the convictions of each person and each group.

The *National Council for Solidarity*, which you set up a few years ago, is an important place for dialogue and reflection for a more effective involvement and for the co-ordination of aid organizations. I warmly encourage you at the diocesan level to foster initiatives adapted to the new needs emerging in the cities and suburbs, and in the rural areas that are sometimes overlooked. *The new forms of poverty require new responses*. Christians are called all the more to conversion of heart, personally and collectively to develop new ways of life that prophetically invite their compatriots to change their behaviour, so that crises may be overcome and each person have his fair share of the national wealth. By giving proof of their freedom as regards their own possessions and by more judicious spending, they will make effective sharing possible with those who are deprived. May all be resourceful in the search for new ways! Thus a renewed world will be built

where life is stronger than death and love overrules the forces of selfishness.

Today charity must put on a new face. It cannot be reduced to mere temporary assistance. It asks for “the courage needed to face the risk and the change involved in every authentic attempt to come to the aid of another” (*Centesimus annus*, n. 58). Those affected by marginalization or any other form of poverty must be able to lead a dignified family life and meet their own needs, by fully developing their potential. In this way they will not remain on the fringes of society; thanks to their brothers and sisters in humanity, they will be offered hope and a future. It will be remembered that attention to the poorest must not be limited to the material dimensions of life. It must also take into consideration each individual’s spiritual development and encourage access to training and culture. The freedom brought by Christ transforms the person’s whole being.

4. It is more urgent than ever to guarantee *the awareness of all the members of the Christian community and their education* in their responsibilities with regard to “life’s wounded”. “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 Jn 4: 20). Christ’s disciples are invited to follow their Master on the ways he himself took by giving his life for humanity, wounded and deprived. Thus, by fitting precisely into the logic of love lived according to Christ, *the Church must be totally supportive of the lowliest*. This is not an optional task, but *an inalienable duty of fidelity to the Gospel*, its acceptance and its proclamation. This fidelity involves concern for the weakest members of the Body of Christ and for every human person. May the baptized listen to the poorest and to their aspirations, and among them be true witnesses to the salvation which Christ brings to every man and woman! May they acquire a true sense of sharing, an expression of their love of neighbour! Charity “is love of the poor, tenderness and compassion for our neighbour. Nothing does greater honour to God than showing mercy!” (St Gregory of Nazianzus, *On love of the poor*, n. 27).

The Lord’s own face is shown through “life’s wounded”. We must constantly witness that “every being wounded in body or in spirit, every person deprived of his most elementary rights, is a living image of Christ” (*Meeting with the poor, the sick and the elderly*, Tours, France, 21 September 1996, n. 2; *L’Osservatore Romano* English edition, 2 October 1996, p. 6). Therefore the encounter with the Lord leads naturally to serving our lowliest brothers and sisters. An attitude of respect, sharing and compassion for the underprivileged reflects our fidelity to Christ. Every Christian who, despite his own weakness, holds out his hand to help his brother rise and continue on his way is thereby acting like the Lord himself. “Charity, in its twofold reality as love of God and neighbour *is the summing up of the moral life of the believer*. It has in God its source and its goal” (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 50).

During your last plenary assembly in Lourdes, you recalled that “by the service of charity, *deacons are witnesses to and ministers of Christ’s charity*. They have the ministerial responsibility to see that charity is concretely lived” (*Le diaconat: un don de Dieu à mettre en œuvre*, 1996). I therefore encourage them, in their ministry as deacons, to give this mission an important place and to

sensitize Christian communities to the service of charity. Your region has a long tradition of social Catholicism which must spur the faithful to acquiring a serious knowledge of the Church's *social doctrine*, considering it as an incentive to practising their faith. Valuable help is also contributed by the *Catholic institutes for advanced studies* specialized in social questions, in particular, in seeking the causes of new situations of poverty and in analyzing structures of injustice which harm man, so as to propose concrete solutions.

5. In your quinquennial reports, you referred to the many forms of Christian presence in places of poverty and suffering in your Dioceses. Thus many Christians, with admirable devotion, *offer assistance to the sick*, the handicapped, the elderly, the dying and the victims of new diseases. In several of your Dioceses, a considerable effort has been made to create facilities for the sick and their families. The Christians who direct them, by their deep human understanding and their efforts to alleviate each one's suffering, are the loving and merciful face of Christ and his Church for all those who are tried.

Many of the faithful are most generously committed to serving their poorer brothers and sisters in *charitable movements* such as Catholic Aid, which recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of its foundation, or again, in your region, the Association of the Homeless. Today, I would particularly like to encourage the young people who, in *apostolic or educational movements* such as the Young Christian Workers or Scout movement, share the frequently difficult situation of their companions and work with them to build a more just society where each person can find a place and live a decent life. May they remember that the struggle for justice is an essential element of the Church's mission! I cordially greet the members of the Society of St Vincent de Paul, whose founder *Frédéric Ozanam* will soon be beatified. Thus it is one of their own who will be held up to French youth as a model of universal brotherhood among the poorest classes, one who declared: "I want to encircle the whole world in a network of charity". I also encourage all Catholics who, in one way or another, organize services providing social assistance or solidarity in *parishes, new communities or associations* in their neighbourhood or village, *in collaboration with their fellow citizens of other ways of thinking*.

It is also necessary for those who have political, economic and social responsibilities to fulfil their task honestly, taking care to give priority to the good of persons and taking into account the human implications of their choices. A clear awareness of the dignity of work, conceived with a view to man's advancement and the fulfilment of his vocation, must motivate them. "Human work ... surpasses all other elements of economic life, for the latter are only means to an end" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 67).

6. It is not always easy, in a context of social crisis, to react to a certain weakening of the moral conscience in *the encounter with persons of different origins or cultures*. Cultural gaps are often profound. They inspire mistrust and fear. Public opinion sometimes blames the immigrant for economic problems.

The Second Vatican Council stresses that “in his fatherly care for all of us, God desired that *all men should form one family* and deal with each other in a spirit of brotherhood. All, in fact, are destined to the very same end, namely God himself, since they have been created in the likeness of God” (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 24). *No human being can be excluded* from this divine plan. Thus, each person *must be attentive to those who are strangers* in society. On various occasions you have recalled the demanding duty of fraternal acceptance and mutual recognition, stressing that “in God’s eyes, all men are of the same race and ancestry” (*Lettre des Évêques aux catholiques de France*). Revelation presents Christ himself to us as the stranger knocking at our door (cf. Mt 25:38; Rv 3:20), the one who rightly urges the Christian community to join *in accepting and supporting our immigrant brothers and sisters* with respect for what they are and for their culture, especially when they are in distress.

It is the Church's mission to recall that in any society the foreigner, like any citizen, has *inalienable rights*, such as that of family life and security, of which he must not be deprived. In drafting laws that enact duties necessary for life in common, *individual rights must be preserved*, and it must be done in a spirit that allows citizens *to learn to live in pluralism*, for the benefit of all. However, the real problems posed by immigration cannot be permanently solved without establishing new solidarity with the immigrants’ countries of origin.

In the parishes, the brotherhood of the faithful of various origins indicates communion in Christ according to the Church’s universal dimension, when each person can express himself and be heard. Similarly, the meeting between Christians and followers of other religious traditions must provide them with a better mutual knowledge in order to build together a more united human family.

7. In public opinion, weariness and little interest sometimes seem to be shown with regard to the long-term problems *of developing the poorest nations*. However, world peace is based on solidarity. On the other hand, it can be noted that while immediate action is often more of an incentive to the faithful, a clearer awareness of the grave issues of development is essential. To remind people of the urgent need to collaborate in the progress of peoples, of “all men and the whole man”, is also part of the Church’s mission. In France there is a long-standing and constant tradition among your *particular Churches, of showing concrete solidarity to the Third World*, and especially to Africa. I invite you to devote more energy to promoting co-operation between the local Churches, listening increasingly to the needs of these Churches and seeking to establish a true partnership.

Here I would like to recognize the *many initiatives* which religious congregations and ecclesiastical institutions are taking, such as the Catholic Delegation for Co-operation and many other organizations of Christian inspiration. They express your communities’ effective attachment to the Third World countries, especially by sending religious and lay personnel to the locality, by sharing resources, or further, by taking responsibility for the acceptance and formation in France of priests

from these countries.

To help your faithful and all people of goodwill once again to become aware of the serious questions linked to structures of world economy, which threaten the life of so many men and women, I invite you to make known *the document recently published by the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum", World Hunger — A Challenge for All: Development in Solidarity*. In fact, as I have already said, "the international economic scene needs an ethic of solidarity, if participation, economic growth, and a just distribution of goods are to characterize the future of humanity" (*Address to the 50th General Assembly of the UN, 5 October 1995, n. 13; L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 11 October 1995, p. 9*).

8. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, to end these meetings I have had on the occasion of the *ad limina* visits of the Bishops of France, and after my recent travels in your country, I would like to tell you once again of my joy at sharing the worries and hopes of your episcopal ministry and at seeing the vitality of the *Church in France*. I hope that during your visit to the Successor of Peter, your prayers at the tombs of the Apostles and your meetings in the dicasteries of the Roman Curia may be for you a source of *dynamism and trust in the future*, in communion with the universal Church. In a few months, we will be meeting again in Paris for *World Youth Day*. This will be the opportunity for the Catholics of France, and more particularly for the young people, to welcome their brothers and sisters from all over the world and to share with them their Gospel convictions and their commitments to build the civilization of love. At the time when we have started preparations for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, I earnestly invite all the Catholics of France to go to this meeting, and to serve their brothers and sisters. Christ is waiting for them there!

I impart my Apostolic Blessing to each one of you and to the members of your Dioceses.

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