



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO A GROUP OF FRENCH BISHOPS
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT**

Saturday, 18 January 1997

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I joyfully receive you as you make your *ad limina* visit. By your pilgrimage to the tombs of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul and your meetings with the Successor of Peter and his collaborators, you will be encouraged in your episcopal mission. Christ, who never abandons his Church and guides her through his Spirit, will increase your hope so that she may be a sign of salvation in the world.

I thank Bishop Michel Saudreau of Le Havre, president of your Apostolic Region, for his words recalling the warm and attentive welcome of the French people during my recent visit to your country, and for his presentation of some of your joint pastoral approaches to help people discover God the Holy Trinity. Your efforts fit into the framework of preparations for the Great Jubilee.

2. In your quinquennial reports you point to *the future of the clergy* as one of your main concerns. The increase in the average age is a source of worry. The priests also share your anxiety, since they can foresee no replacement and sometimes find it difficult to deal with the many duties of the ministry. I understand your fears for the future of Christian communities, who need ordained ministers. However, I invite you to have hope, in particular *by meditating on the Council's Decree on the ministry and life of priests* "*Presbyterorum ordinis*", whose 30th anniversary we celebrated in 1995. This will be an opportunity for all who have received the priesthood to take a new look at the mission entrusted to them by the Lord and "to rekindle the gift of God that is within them through the laying on of hands" (cf. 2 Tm 1:6).

With you, I would therefore like to encourage priests, particularly your diocesan priests, to strengthen and renew *their spirit of diocesan priesthood*. Through their spiritual life they will discover in the exercise of true *caritas pastoralis* a way of personal holiness, zeal for their ministry and a strong incentive to young men who are hesitating to commit themselves to the priesthood.

3. The Apostle's exhortation to Timothy reminds us of *the close link that exists between consecration and mission*. Without this unity, the ministry would be merely a social function. Called and chosen by the Lord, priests share in his mission of building up the Church, the Body of Christ and the temple of the Spirit (cf. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 1). "In the Church and on behalf of the Church, priests are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ, the Head and Shepherd" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 15). Taken from among their brethren, they are first of all men of God; it is important that they do not neglect their spiritual life, for all pastoral and theological activity "must in fact begin with prayer" (St Albert the Great, *Commentary on Mystical Theology*, 15), which is "something important that makes the soul grow and unites it to Jesus" (St Therese of Lisieux, *Manuscripts autobiographiques*, C, fol. 25).

4. In one's daily intimate relationship with Christ that unifies life and ministry, it is right *to give precedence to the Eucharist*, which contains the whole spiritual treasure of the Church. Each day it configures the priest to Christ, the High Priest whose minister he is. And in the celebration of the Eucharist as in that of all the other sacraments, the priest is united with his Bishop and "so makes him present in a certain sense in individual assemblies of the faithful" (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 5); he gives the People of God its cohesion and helps it grow, by gathering it around the two tables of the Word and of the Eucharist and by offering men the support of divine mercy and tenderness. The *Liturgy of the Hours* is the basis of his day and shapes his spiritual life. *Meditation on the Word of God*, "*lectio divina*" and *mental prayer* lead him to live in intimacy with the Lord who reveals the mysteries of salvation to those who stay close to him, following his beloved disciple's example (Jn 13:25).

In God's presence, the priest finds the strength to live the essential requirements of his ministry. He acquires the necessary flexibility to do the will of the One who sent him, by *being constantly available to the Spirit's action*, for it is he who gives growth and we who cooperate with him (cf. 1 Cor 3:5-9). According to the promise he made on the day of his ordination, this availability is made concrete through his *obedience to the Bishop* who, in the name of the Church, sends him to be Christ's representative among his brothers and sisters, despite his weakness and frailty. The Lord speaks through the priest and reveals himself to men.

5. In contemporary society which prefers certain erroneous concepts of sexuality, *priestly or consecrated celibacy* (not unlike the commitment made in the sacrament of marriage) *prophetically* recalls the profound meaning of human life. Chastity disposes those who are committed to it to put their life in God's hands, making an offering of all their inner abilities to the Lord, for the service of the Church and the world's salvation. By "perfect and perpetual continence

for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”, the priest reinforces his mystical union with Christ to whom he gives himself “in a new and excellent way” and “with undivided heart” (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 16). Thus in his being and in his action, he freely makes the gift and sacrifice of himself in response to the gift and sacrifice of his Lord. Perfect chastity leads the priest to live a universal love and to become attentive to each of his brethren. This attitude is the source of incomparable *spiritual fruitfulness* “to which no other physical fertility can be compared” and in some way makes him “better fitted for a broader acceptance of fatherhood in Christ” (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 16).

6. Today, the mission is often difficult and its forms are quite varied. The small number of priests means that they are frequently pushed to the limits of their strength. I am familiar with the poor and difficult conditions in which your country’s priests are willing to live their mission. I salute their perseverance and ask them not to neglect their own health. It is natural for Bishops, who are already concerned about the quality of their lives, to be increasingly so. May priests not lose heart and may they reach out to people *in order to proclaim the Gospel and make disciples of them all!* It is incumbent upon them to ask the laity to fulfil their specific mission, inspiring in each, according to his charism, an appropriate participation in the liturgy and catechesis, or a responsible involvement in movements and different ecclesial activities, for the good of the Church. Thus priests will live their ministry in deep union with all the members of the People of God, who are called to take part in the common mission round their Bishop. A new apostolic spirit will spring from this complementarity.

7. *Contemporary man thirsts for the truth*; human research is not sufficient to fulfil their deep desires. Those who are consecrated must be the first to present Christ to the world, by preparing and celebrating the sacraments, by explaining the Scriptures, by catechizing young people and adults, by guiding Christian groups. *Teaching the Christian mystery* also has an essential place in their ministry. Indeed, how will our contemporaries, challenged by cultures and sciences which ask important questions of the faith, be able to follow Christ if they lack a *basic knowledge of dogma and a strong spiritual foundation*? Sunday homilies should therefore be prepared with great care, prayer and study, as they will help the faithful live their faith in their daily lives and enter into dialogue with their brothers and sisters.

8. The priestly mission is so important that it requires *continuing formation*. I encourage you in your Dioceses, your Apostolic Regions, or at the national level to allow your close collaborators time for spiritual and theological renewal. The three preparatory years for the Great Jubilee provide a particularly suitable framework, by proposing that we direct our gaze in turn to Christ, to the Holy Spirit and to the Father.

The Church in France has a wealth of holy pastors who are models for today’s priests. I am thinking specifically of the Curé of Ars, patron of the world’s priests, the members of the French School, St Francis de Sales, who offers a sound approach to the spiritual life, the practice of virtues and pastoral governance (cf. *Introduction to the Devout Life*), and, in this century, the many

pastors who are still a true inspiration to priests today. Moreover, you have an ecclesial heritage to keep alive. France has marvellous editions of patristic and spiritual authors, which must be acknowledged and maintained. It is a treasure of faith that can foster the spiritual life and strengthen one's mission. This heritage helps one to meet contemporary demands in a new way.

9. *Priestly fellowship* is essential within the diocesan presbyterate; it brings each priest support and comfort; it enables them to pray together, to share the joys and hopes of the ministry and to welcome their brothers in the priesthood with sensitivity, while respecting a legitimate diversity of charisms and pastoral options. I urge you and all the members of the clergy to be close to priests and deacons who are experiencing difficult personal or pastoral situations. They need very special help. I am thinking again of those who are elderly and no longer have the strength to undertake a full-time ministry. Most of them can provide many services and be good advisers to their confrères.

10. You have gradually reinstated *the permanent diaconate*, in the spirit of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, and you have given importance to the diaconate in your Dioceses. Deacons are ordained “for service” (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 29) to the ecclesial community and to all people, in trusting collaboration with their Bishop and with all pastors. By preaching, by celebrating baptisms and marriages, by exercising their ministry in many ecclesial services, they guide the spiritual growth of their brothers and sisters. By their professional life, by their responsibilities in society and in the family, they make themselves servants in the serving Church and give concrete expression to her charitable concern for all. In carrying out their mission, those who are married have the important support of their wife and children.

11. You also stressed the *influence of monasteries and spiritual centres*. In a world marked by indifference and the loss of religious sense, our contemporaries must rediscover the value of silence, which makes it possible to turn to the Lord, to unify their life and to give it its full meaning. For this rediscovery, *monks and nuns, as well as men and women religious* as a whole, have a leading role to play. By a life given entirely to God and to their brethren, they show the world in a prophetic way that Christ alone gives life and that only an existence based on spiritual and moral values is a source of true happiness (cf. *Vita consecrata*, n. 15). But even more, consecrated persons seek to reproduce in themselves “the form of life that the Son of God made his own when he came into the world” (*Lumen gentium*, n. 44). This configuration to Christ’s mystery achieves the *Confessio Trinitatis* proper to religious life.

Your reports demonstrate the essential role played by men and women religious in the pastoral and charitable life of your Dioceses. I acknowledge their devotion and generosity, particularly with young people, the sick, those who are furthest from the Church and the most deprived.

12. At the close of our meeting, I would like to recall *the Marian dimension of all Christian life, and most particularly of the priestly life*. At the foot of the Cross where the Church was born, the disciple welcomes the Saviour’s Mother. Together they receive the gift of Christ’s sacrifice, so that

the mystery of the Redemption may be proclaimed to the world (cf. *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 45).

Lastly, my thoughts turn to the faithful in your communities. Please convey to those who are involved in the Church's mission through prayer and action, the priests, deacons and religious as well as all the Catholics of your Dioceses, the Pope's cordial greeting and encouragement, and assure them of my prayer that, despite current problems, they will continue to hope! I also ask you to convey my affectionate greeting to the Bishops emeritus of your region.

Through the intercession of Our Lady and the saints of your land, I cordially grant you my Apostolic Blessing, which I extend to all the members of the People of God entrusted to your pastoral care.

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