



The Holy See

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

Saturday, 8 March 1997

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I am pleased to address you together, Bishops of the Apostolic Region of Provence and the Mediterranean, after the personal meetings which your *ad limina* visits have enabled me to have with you, and I thank you first of all for sharing your pastoral concerns with me. Your Dioceses constitute a region that is quite varied but to which the Mediterranean gives a common orientation; this is one of Europe's loveliest areas, which attracts not only tourists but also longterm residents. Thus you are in an area with multiple contacts. The presence of so many foreigners leads you to develop an ecumenical dialogue with Christians from the East and with the Ecclesial Communities which arose from the Reformation. On the other hand, interreligious dialogue acquires particular importance because of the presence among you of many believers of Islam; exchanges with them will certainly contribute to the serious studies, being done within the framework of a new specialized institute. I also recall that your region includes several important universities, whose work is extended by active institutes for scientific research. The Catholic communities in your Dioceses are often small and priests tend to be scarce. But you are aware of and share the zeal of the clergy and the laity, their fidelity to their prestigious and ancient origins linked to the apostolic generations, their support for a very respectable popular piety, as well as for the renewal efforts achieved by your Dioceses as a whole. Please convey the Successor of Peter's encouragement to all the faithful, to the priests, and to the contemplative and apostolic religious.

You have told me of your concern for the poor, often all the more acute since in your region there is a starker contrast than elsewhere between poverty and affluence. It is to be hoped that all the faithful will seek to promote a sense of total and impartial public service in society for the benefit of

all the inhabitants regardless of their origins, in solidarity and mutual aid, and that they will generously practise the precept of love of neighbour. May they all join forces each day, to be convincing witnesses of Christ and of the demands of the Gospel! In this spirit, I would like to give special encouragement to the pastors and faithful of the Diocese of Ajaccio for their commitment to reconciliation and fraternal peace in their tormented society.

2. The subject on which I would like to reflect with you further today is *the pastoral care of the liturgy and sacraments*, taking into account the essential role every Bishop and the Episcopal Conferences have in this area, as I recalled in my Apostolic Letter for the 25th anniversary of the Council's Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, (4 December 1988, nn. 20-21).

We must constantly improve the implementation of the decisions of the Second Vatican Council, which fortunately emphasized the liturgy's place at the heart of the Church's life: "For it is the liturgy through which, especially in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, 'the work of our redemption is accomplished', and it is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church.... It ... show[s] forth the Church, a sign lifted up among the nations, to those who are outside, a sign under which the scattered children of God may be gathered together" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 2). These words of the Council, in their whole rich context, already show that liturgical celebration, and especially the commemoration of Christ's redemptive sacrifice, "is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows" (*ibid.*, n. 10). For the liturgy is the place *par excellence* where the members of Christ's Body are one with the Saviour's prayer, with his total gift of self for the glorification of the Father and with his mission of salvation for the world. As the Second Vatican Council goes on to say, it is "an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ.... In it full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members" (*ibid.*, n. 7).

3. The function of the pastoral care of the liturgy is therefore to guide priests and faithful in their participation in the central action Christ entrusted to his Church, which is the actualization of the paschal mystery of the Passion and Resurrection. "For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth 'the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church'" (*ibid.*, n. 5). It must be constantly repeated that the Eucharist makes the Church and that it makes her the sign of Christ.

A correct conception of the liturgy is mindful that it must *clearly express the fundamental notes of the Church*. It is primarily the unity of the assembly in which the baptized gather to celebrate the same Lord. In this regard it is necessary for ritual unity to be perceptible to the different generations of the faithful, different milieus and different cultures. There should be no opposition between the universal and the particular. Of course, in towns and villages and from one country to another, assemblies have distinctive features, but the liturgical celebration must permit every person to understand that they are not performing a private action, confined to the group present,

but that the Church is “the sacrament of unity” (ibid., n. 26). It is the Lord who gathers, and the Church advances to meet him “until he comes”, to achieve in all its fullness the benevolent plan of the Father: “according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ ... to unite all things in him” (Eph 1:9,10). Thus the *catholicity* in which all are called to participate can be seen, even in the most modest gathering.

The sense of the sacred is to be preserved with attentive discernment, while avoiding such an exaggerated “sacralizing” of the liturgical style that it deprives the rites or sacred words of their proper sense which is to signify the gift of God and his sanctifying presence. To live the liturgical celebration in holiness is to welcome the Lord who comes to complete in us what we cannot accomplish by our own efforts.

It is clear that the *apostolic* note flows from the mission entrusted to the Apostles, from their participation in the one priesthood of Christ in the ministerial function with which they have been invested for the whole Body of the Church, which shares in the universal priesthood. The Church is apostolic as well, because she never abandons her *missionary vocation*. In the celebration of the liturgy, all that the faithful accomplish in order to fulfil their mission in the midst of the world is presented to God for his glorification. And the celebration of the liturgy leads people to take up this mission, with the support of Christ’s life-giving grace, in the ways proper to each one’s vocation.

Community liturgy helps the members of the one, holy catholic and apostolic Church to *live the mystery of Christ in time*. It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of gathering for Mass on the Lord’s day. The early Christians understood this well: “We live under the observance of the Lord’s day [the day] when our life is raised by him and by his death ... how could we live without him?” (St Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Magnesians*, 9, 1-2). Weekly attendance at the Sunday Eucharist and the cycle of the liturgical year make it possible to give a rhythm to Christian life and to sanctify time, which the risen Lord opens to the blessed eternity of the kingdom. Pastoral care will see that *the liturgy is not isolated from the rest of Christian life*: for the faithful are invited daily to continue their common liturgical practice in daily private prayer; this spiritual discipline gives new vigour to the witness of the faith lived by Christians each day, and also to the fraternal service of the poor and to one’s neighbour in general. The pastoral care of the liturgy, which cannot end at the church door, suggests to each one that he should unify his life and his actions.

4. The liturgy, which expresses the Church’s proper nature and is a source for the mission, is given to us by the Church herself to glorify God: thus *its laws*, which should be respected by distinguishing the *different roles* carried out by ordained ministers and by lay people. Whatever directs believers to God, what gathers them and what unites them with one another and with all the other assemblies should be given priority. The Council was clear on this matter: “Pastors of souls must, therefore, realize that when the liturgy is celebrated, something more is required than the laws governing valid and lawful celebration. It is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite and enriched by it”

(*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 11).

The celebrants and leaders must help the assembly enter into a liturgical celebration which is not merely their own production but is *an act of the whole Church*. Priority must therefore be given to the words and actions of Christ, to what has been called “God’s surprise”. The role of guidance is not to express everything or prescribe everything; it will respect a certain spiritual freedom for each person in his relationship with the word of God and with the sacramental signs. A liturgical act is an event of grace whose effect exceeds the will or expertise of the agents who are called to be humble instruments in the Lord’s hands. It is they who have the task of making it possible to see what God is for us, what he does for us, and of making the faithful today realize that they are entering into the history of creation sanctified by the Redeemer, in the mystery of universal salvation.

5. At a practical level, I will add that it is important to attend to *the quality of the signs*, without however showing “elitism”, for Christ’s followers, whatever their culture, must be able to recognize in the words and actions the Lord’s presence in his Church and the gifts of his grace. The first sign is that of the *assembly* itself. Having gathered together, the community in a way gives hospitality to Christ and to the people he loves. Everyone’s attitude counts, for the liturgical assembly is the first image the Church gives of herself, invited to the Lord’s banquet.

Next, it is in the Church that *the word of God* is authentically proclaimed, a word venerated because it is a living word in which the Spirit dwells. Every care must be given to reading by the various ministers of the word, who will have interiorized it so that it will reach the faithful as a true light and a force for the present. On the priests’ part, the homily requires meditation and assimilation so that they can impart the meaning of the word and enable the faithful really to adhere to it and carry it out in their daily tasks.

Hymns and sacred music have an essential role in reinforcing everyone’s communion, in a form very sensitive to the acceptance and assimilation of the word of God, through the unity of prayer. The biblical importance of singing, the vehicle of wisdom, is well known: “*Psallite sapienter*” the psalmist says (Ps 47 [46]:8). See to it that beautiful hymns based on worthy texts and in harmony with a meaningful content are chosen and composed. Even more generally than the hymn properly so-called, liturgical music has the evocative capacity to interweave theological meaning and a sense of formal beauty and poetic insight. It is also appropriate to add here that besides the word and the hymn, silence has an indispensable place in the liturgy when it is well prepared; it enables each person to develop in his heart spiritual dialogue with the Lord.

In your country, which has a precious religious heritage, there is no need to stress that the *places and objects of worship* are naturally expressive signs, whether they are the heritage of the past or of contemporary creations, for the faith gives a real creative dynamism to culture and art. In this regard, I would like to say that I greatly appreciate the care given by the State authorities to many

religious buildings, cathedrals or parish churches. Make every effort to give life to village churches, even when there are fewer inhabitants. May the liturgy always be the true *raison d'être* of these monuments, for, it has been said, just as stones fit together, so do men when they gather to praise God.

In short, the liturgy is an extraordinary means of *evangelizing man, with all his qualities of mind and the sharpness of his senses, with his capacity for insight and his artistic or musical sensitivity, which better expresses his desire for the absolute than any speech could.*

For the liturgy to be carried out properly and fruitfully, the *formation of celebrants and leaders* must be carefully followed, as your diocesan liturgical-commissions are doing. Continue to call the attention of liturgical leadership teams to the arrangements for celebrations, preparing them in positive collaboration between the priests and the laity.

6. What I have just recalled on the subject of the pastoral care of the liturgy as a whole must be completed with several reflections on *the pastoral care of the sacraments*, which is not reserved to a few specialists. The entire Church of Christ is responsible for welcoming our brothers and sisters, with love, even if they have fallen away from regular practice. To fulfil their mission as the stewards of God's mysteries, priests rely on the co-operation of lay people who agree to form teams providing preparation for Baptism or Matrimony, as well as preparation for the Eucharist and Confirmation, within the framework of catechesis and the catechumenate.

For pastors and communities who receive requests from families, adolescents or adults, it is a question of carefully discerning the meaning of the step they have taken, in the actual context of their personal situation. If their approach often seems hesitant or routine, it is good to keep an open mind and to trust in the presence of the Spirit precisely in those who are asking; sacraments are proposed as gifts of grace for one's whole being, a call to conversion, and not as the achievement or seal of a maturity in the faith which must have been previously acquired.

The sacramental ministry is inseparable from the mission of evangelization as a whole: it leads to arranging occasions when the faith and initiation into Christian life can be presented; it seeks to encourage the spiritual progress of those who come and knock at the Church's door, while communicating the Lord's call to them and clearly showing its Gospel demands. It is also desirable that parishes and movements try to keep in touch with people for whom the reception of the sacraments is in danger of remaining an isolated act extraneous to their daily lives.

Without being able here to go further into how to approach the different sacraments, I would like to invite you especially to deepen your reflection on *the sacrament of Matrimony*, in its dimension as a sign of the Covenant and of God's faithful love. The crisis of marriage and the family calls for a renewal of the Christian meaning of this sacrament, which should lead couples to bear witness to an authentic conception of marriage that reflects God's relation with humanity.

You also point out that *the sacrament of Penance* has lost much of its appeal. There are many reasons for this especially of a cultural kind, such as widespread individualism, or again, misunderstandings of the moral demands, the sense of sin and one's relationship with God. The service we must offer our brothers and sisters is not to give up making them reflect seriously, in the light of the Gospel which reveals "God, who is rich in mercy" (Eph 2:4). This especially regards men and women who are sometimes burdened by sin even if they are unable to identify it and shrink from confession, unaware of that admirable gift which the Father bestows on us through Christ the Saviour, and who disregard the need for a conscience guilty of serious sin to have recourse to the sacrament of forgiveness before receiving the Eucharist. May priests not underestimate the impact of the ministry of reconciliation, which is certainly demanding, but a source of peace and joy for those to whom God's merciful love is revealed.

7. Wise pastoral care of the liturgy is one of the most important tasks of the Church's mission, in order to open the ways of communion in the grace of salvation to the greatest possible number. I have treated these issues to encourage the considerable efforts made in your Dioceses since the Second Vatican Council. As I said to a liturgical congress in 1984, it is necessary to keep in mind, "with great balance, God's part and man's, the hierarchy and the faithful, tradition and progress, the law and adaptation, the individual and the community, silence and choral enthusiasm. In this way the earthly liturgy will be linked with that of heaven where ... a single choir will be formed ... to raise with one and the same voice a hymn of praise to the Father, through Jesus Christ" (*Address*, 27 October 1984, n. 6).

Let us ask the Lord to help the baptized believe firmly in Christ's action in the contemporary world through the sacraments he has given his Church. Let us give thanks for the devotion of those who contribute to liturgical celebrations in your communities, without forgetting the young people, now more numerous, who serve at the altar and are thus more disposed to hear, if the case should arise, the call of the Lord to follow him in priesthood or the consecrated life.

In the name of the Lord, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to all the members of your Dioceses.